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Cover by Kathy Jacobi—from "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

She took her necklace off

And laid it in the sand. . . .

She opened her stone-studded belt.

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Ambiguous Birds and Quizzical Messengers: Parody as Stevens' Double Agent

BARBARA M. FISHER

Wallace Stevens' poetry is full of harping angels, ambiguous birds and quizzical messengers. These creatures can provide rattling good entertainment: hosts of angels tumble about the stratosphere; inchling bantam-roosters magically, priapically, transform into "ten-foot poets"; a Papal courier launches into a slow strip-tease. Such figures, taken all together, constitute a parodic layer in Stevens' work that relies to a considerable extent on Scripture for its subtext, and upon a particular theological background for its subject matter.

It looks as though Stevens periodically yielded to the seduction of this material. From some of the earliest poems in *Harmonium* through the later periods following "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," one finds Stevens toying with concepts such as the doctrine of Virgin Birth, the Personhood of the Paraclete, the Annunciation. Once or twice he flings down a liturgical invocation like a gauntlet. Within this frame of reference, poems like "The Dove in the Belly" assume a satirical function while "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" takes on a quietly blasphemous significance.¹ The point is that Stevens frequently chooses theological material as the object of parody, and, as often as not, a point of doctrine with erotic overtones.

What is Stevens up to? Here is a modern poet—with a trained legal mind—who in 1942 writes to a friend, "I loathe anything mystical."² Here, too, is a thoughtful man who includes among his aphorisms the observation that "God is in me or else is not at all [does not exist]" (*OP* 172). Finally, there is the Stevens who has just celebrated a seventy-third birthday in October 1952, who writes with disarming ambivalence: "At my age it would be nice to be able to read more and think more and be myself more and to make up my mind about God, say, before it is too late, or at least before he makes up his mind about me" (*LWS* 763). With these observations in mind, I am going to suggest that, in poems that are anchored to a theological "undertext," Stevens is using parody, satire, travesty and burlesque to accomplish a double purpose.

All parodic invention uses a mimetic, or imitative, method that paradoxically produces discourse and disavowal at the same time. A *Dunciad*, for example, relies upon an *Iliad* to sharpen its satirical point, while its Goddess of Dulness—a purely allegorical figure—underscores by irreverence the vanished significance of an antique pantheon. In a less gentle but equally familiar use, parody attacks its antecedent. By means of ridicule and caustic mimicry it seeks to expose, disarm, and debase its model. As Bakhtin has pointed out,³ parody pokes fun at, questions, "dialogizes," enlivens, and even engulfs the father-work, but also takes delight in assuming its aspect. Parody, as it were, loves to walk about in its father's bathrobe and slippers. Indeed, it pretends to *be* its parent while it simultaneously comments *on* the parent, which leads us to the second, less familiar, purpose of parody in Stevens' work.

For a modern poet, parody offers a way to talk about things that are felt to be important but are no longer taken seriously: the confluence of literature and religion in a sacred text; a boyhood faith; the constraining necessity of philosophers, theologians, poets to create sublime fictions. I am suggesting, then, that Stevens uses parody both to establish a link with traditional sources and to maintain a distance, separate himself, from those same sources. I am proposing that parody constitutes one sort of permissible discourse with institutions of the past, whether it be the "Rock" of early religious training or Stevens' other theology, the "romantic tenements" of aesthetic form and poetic utterance. And I am supposing that Stevens' particular use of parody for such diametrically opposed ends was inevitable, because it occurred in a time (still our time) that is preoccupied—not so much by the problem of a possible theology, or an alternative to theology, but by great and subtle adjustments to its absence.

At this point, it will be helpful to focus on the idea of parody itself before turning to a pair of poems in *Harmonium*. From there, I should like to examine a witty, erotic, and strangely moving canto in "Notes," in which a quizzical messenger of indeterminate gender demonstrates Stevens' double use of the parodic mode, a use at once sacral and sacrilegious.

The term *parody* derives, ultimately, from the Greek *para-*, beside, and *oidia*, singing, literally "at the side of the singing" or, roughly, "countersong." Bakhtin's theory of parody is developed from this notion of countersong. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, the Russian Formalist holds that, since antiquity, every "high" genre (i.e., epic, lyric, tragedy) has generated a countervailing mode, a comical parodic counterpart. It is precisely this parodic "countersong" that fulfills the condition of mirroring reality, according to Bakhtin, for it provides "the corrective of laughter and criticism to all existing straightforward genres, languages, styles, voices; to force men to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured in them."⁴

In *Anatomy of Satire*, Gilbert Highet classes parody as a venial form of satire, not the poisoned dart but the distorting mirror. His definition of the mode emphasizes intention: "Parody is imitation which, through distortion and exaggeration, evokes amusement, derision, and sometimes scorn."⁵ Highet usefully refers to the evidence, in poetry, of self-parody, noting a Wordsworth sonnet that features a "Stuffed Owl," and Swinburne's mellifluous and mercilessly alliterative "Nephelidia." Both of these poems exaggerate the styles of their respective authors, and both pass judgment on their own poetic personae by slyly implying that they are prey to self-indulgence. (Students of Stevens will recognize similar prodigies of self-parody in "Bantams in Pine-Woods," for instance, where the poet attempts to dissociate himself from his own *avoirdufois*: "Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal./ Your world is you. I am my world." There is the almost contrapuntal self-parody in section XXV of "The Man With the Blue Guitar." This is the irregularly rhymed section that begins, "He held the world upon his nose," and ends seven couplets later with, "A fat thumb beats out ai-ai-yi"—unmistakably the thumbprint of the poet in his character of plump and mocking *jongleur*.)⁶

In contrast with Bakhtin's agonistic theory of parody, Highet's argument presents parodic imitation as a neutralizing agent, whether it masquerades as epic or heroic verse, or whether it blandly imitates the form while mocking the content of a prior work, as does Byron's murderous parody of Southey's *A Vision of Judgment*.⁷ One of Stevens' early pieces conforms to both these views at once, for it attacks and seeks to neutralize the power of the object it attacks. Essentially satiric, its mimicry and mockery, both, are directed against ideological content. On one level, this poem seeks to "neutralize" the theological construct of the Paraclete—that least graspable Person of the Holy Trinity whose emblem is the Dove—while on another level, the poem locks in combat with its object and attempts to "dialogize," or argue against it. We shall see, however, that yet a third element enters the ideological debate that smoulders at the core of the piece.

Over the jungle of the parakeets, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, presides the Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws. He is the controlling influence of this cosmic jungle, a "parakeet of parakeets" in whose image, presumably, the prevailing life-form is echoed. He would be Mozartian, doubtless, if he sang, for he is a classically "perfect cock." But except for a "pip" he does not sing—the *pip*, among other things, connotes a disease of poultry that may result in blindness—and, as it turns out, this regal bird is as blind as Milton. His "church" is a sun-bleached rock and he is the Unmoved Mover who "exerts his will" upon the jungle universe below, holding it in an impersonal, yet curiously bestial death-grip with his brazen claws. The poem is short enough to set forth in its entirety. Notice that the top line of each stanza stands aloof from the rhymed couplets below, and that the stanzas are cast as tercets, a three-elemented unity:

Above the forest of the parakeets,
A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
A pip of life amid a mort of tails.

(The rudiments of tropics are around,
Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)
His lids are white because his eyes are blind.

He is not paradise of parakeets,
Of his golden ether, golden alquazil,
Except because he broods there and is still.

Panache upon panache, his tails deploy
Upward and outward, in green-vented forms,
His tip a drop of water full of storms.

But though the turbulent tinges undulate
As his pure intellect applies its laws,
He moves not on his coppery, keen claws.

He munches a dry shell while he exerts
His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock,
To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock.

(CP 82)

Discussing what he terms the "sacred irreverence" of this poem, Daniel Fuchs observes: "For all his magnificence, the king of the parakeets remains a caricature of a god of reason."⁸ And, like the blind deity in "Negation" (CP 98), he adds, "God becomes a parody of omniscience and omnipotence."⁹ In truth, Stevens might easily have designed his brooding bird in satiric contrast to the divine Being that hovers over the opening passage of *Paradise Lost*, who

. . . from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satest brooding on the vast Abyss
And madst it pregnant.

Unlike Milton's mighty Spirit, whose brooding brings forth the universe, the "parakeet of parakeets" broods and "is still." He is further debased by a detumescent "mort of tails." Stevens' travesty of the Paraclete of Trinitarian doctrine (a doctrine he was trained in as a child) can be read as a devastating comment on religion as a formal institution. It provides a sarcastic footnote, also, to the notion that the "love of God for God" is the supreme measure of love and the essence of perfection.

Stevens' departures from reverence and the covert nature of his attack on formal religion, in "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," tend to align his sharp-clawed Paraclete with that species of tendentious humor that Freud classed as "cynical." According to Freud, the target of cynical humor,

may well be institutions, dogmas of morality and religion . . . which enjoy so much respect that objections to them can only be made under the mask of a joke and indeed a joke concealed by its facade.¹⁰

In a very real sense, then, we can conclude that the coppery keen claws in this poem are the poet's own. But there is another aspect to the ideological debate in the piece, as I noted earlier, that deserves attention if we are exploring Stevens' special uses of parody.

Louis H. Leiter, in an extremely sensitive reading, has shown that Stevens chose clusters of words for this poem that convey antithetical meanings. It is structured, he says, on "dynamic oxymoronic images" which "change as we watch them, rendering in almost visual terms . . . strong patterns of growth and paralysis."¹¹ He points out the legal conceit that threads through the verses, but also notes the "spiritual energy . . . everywhere apparent." He reduces the opposed forces in the poem to evocations of life and death: energy and flux on one side of the coin and morbid paralysis on the other. At the poem's "thematic center,"

Leiter discerns “stasis, a state of suspended animation.” He concludes, “The ‘perfect’ cock is perfect because it is neither alive nor dead.” The “perfect,” one should add, is also a tense, and one by which Stevens ironically relegates this bird to the past. The “perfect cock” is the denizen of a time, as Stevens tells us,

. . . when bishops’ books
Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that.
(CP 215)

Leiter’s reading, I think, has as much to tell us about the poet as the poem. Stevens’ relation to the idea of deity is, of course, the animating concept of “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws.” The very ambivalence of the ruling concept suggests that, on one level at least, the poem acts as a “position paper” on the subject of faith. Belief is neither fully alive nor yet entirely dead, but caught in a state of “suspended animation.” Stevens does not approach, at this time, the positiveness of a Coleridgean suspension of disbelief. But, although he generally responds to the notion with irony or avoidance tactics, the mere *prospect* of belief lurking, as it were, in the corners, is a powerful agent. The possibility of faith, then, is strong enough to cause the paralysis, the “stasis” at the center of the poem about the parakeet/Paraclete. The desire for belief is strong enough to infiltrate the Stevensian parodic discourse as a silent but effective agent.

Precisely these questions of faith and irony—the remnants of belief and the overlay of cynicism that turn Stevensian parody into a two-faced or two-dimensional mode—bring us to the poem that Harold Bloom considered most important among those of the early period: “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” For in the first stanza of “Monocle,” we find Stevens using parody to look forward and backward at the same time—on the one hand overtly, adapting to the time that is, and covertly on the other, echoing the spiritual values of a time that was.

“Monocle” was first published in 1918, at the close of World War I, when Stevens had just turned thirty-nine.¹² The poem consists of twelve eleven-line stanzas that closely approximate the ballade stanza. The title, which can be loosely rendered as “seeing things from my uncle’s point of view,” substitutes a one-eyed vision of things as they are for the blindness of the parakeet’s world. The tone of the poem modulates from bitterness to nostalgia to the more tranquil mood of the final stanzas which seem to reflect a genuine stoic assent. But I am not going to discuss “Monocle” as a whole; the poem has received plentiful and competent critical attention over the years. I propose to trace an extension of the parodic mode that is peculiarly evident in the first stanza of “Monocle,” so the focus will be on that stanza alone. And the first stanza of “Monocle” demands attention: it begins explosively, with an invocation that doubles as an invective, and it begins unusually for Stevens, with four lines of quotation. Here are the first seven lines of the opening stanza:

“Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,

There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
I wish that I might be a thinking stone.

(CP 13)

Most critical readings of "Monocle" tend to ignore the fact of the quotation. What is the point of the quotation? What is being quoted? or who? With one exception,¹³ nobody has remarked that, of the four lines contained within quotation marks, two verses are clearly liturgical in nature while the two that follow are secular and conversational, perhaps a replication of the poet's own words. Why should two such divergent modes of discourse be convened within the same set of quotations? Again, so far from suggesting a possible source, a prior text that would account in some way for the opening lines, it has been assumed that Stevens is drawing upon sacred litany in the most general sense, and with blasphemous intent. Finally, nobody has pointed to the curious insertion of litany and the vocative into a secular work. I would suggest that something more intricate, more mysterious than mere blasphemy is at work here.

Bloom calls it a "bravura" first stanza, "one of the most ferocious ironies in our poetry, where the imagery of presence and absence refers less to the muse . . . or the beloved . . . than to the language of passion."¹⁴ Helen Vendler offers a more personal reading. Against Bloom's notion that the passage concerns the loss of language—in its broadest sense, and with all that implies—Vendler observes a deterioration of the marriage relation. The last "energies of love and faith," she says, are "now exhausted in a depleted marriage" (which is close to Bloom's reading) and "a sardonic pity and antagonism separate the conscious poet from his self-deceiving wife."¹⁵ Both these readings contribute something to the poem, but the absence of a passionate language and the depletion of "energies of love and faith" become even more meaningful when carried beyond the immediate context of marital life. I believe that what is revealed in the opening passage of "Monocle" is as much historical as the liturgical vocative suggests, as figural as the sacred image invoked, and as paradigmatic as it is autobiographical, and ironic. These are large assertions, but they are based on a text that I believe to be the actual source of Stevens' initial quotation.

One medieval French work stands forth as the most likely candidate for the source of the opening lines in "Monocle." A true *ballade* (three ten-line stanzas with a refrain, and a seven-line *envoi*), it introduces a poignant liturgical note into a larger secular work, the work itself devised as a rollicking, sardonic parody of a legal will and testament. I am referring, of course, to the fifteenth-century *Le Testament* of François Villon, and specifically to the extraordinary *Ballade: pour prier Nostre Dame*, the supplicatory hymn that Villon "bequeathed" to "*ma pauvre mère*," his mother.

The whole ballade is conceived as a "legacy," a gift from the impoverished poet to his similarly impoverished mother for the sacred purpose of prayer. It is written

in the mother's voice and from her point of view, so that the entire *ballade*—including the envoy—is a quotation. What singles out Villon's *Ballade* as Stevens' "prior text" is the startling similarity of the opening lines. Stevens, who once wrote that "French and English constitute a single language" (*OP* 178), begins to express "his uncle's point of view" with the invocation of Our Lady:

Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon . . .

Listen to the identical cadence in Villon's opening lines:

*Dame du ciel, regente terrienne,
Emperiere des infernaulx paluz . . .*

(Lady of heaven, regent of earth,
Empress of the infernal marshes . . .)¹⁶

Here, then, is parody with a profound double purpose, for a quotation admitted into a work arrives surrounded by its original text, and context. Villon's poem supplicates the Son through the Mother—by way of his own mother—and we recognize that in making his own mother the agent of intercession to the divine Intercessor, Villon is himself pleading for Grace in a graceful way. His great refrain refers to mother and son both: "*En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir*" ("In this faith I will to live and to die"). If the doubleness of the supplication weren't perfectly clear at the outset, it is thrust at the reader in the envoy, because here Villon signs his name to the piece in an acrostic. This is not an uncommon device in medieval lyric poetry, but this "signing" of the prayer in his mother's voice is at once an act of humility and an act of authorship. It is important that the entire poem is, in effect, a quotation, and that the "speaker" is the mother. Aside from the purely dramatic effect of this device, we find an instrument by which the poet invokes the heavenly powers through a *persona* and by *imitatio*, the imitation of a prayer for grace.

Stevens' quotation of Villon underscores the double purpose of parody because it employs mockery in both its senses: "imitation," or attempting a likeness, and "ridicule," holding up to derision. The opening verses of "Monocle" may very well express anger and bitterness by means of mocking exaggeration, but they also reproduce sacred litany; they import a theological vocative into an a-theological context. Bakhtin, who treats parody with some seriousness, refers to this doubleness when he characterizes Hellenistic and Medieval parodies as "the complex and contradictory process of accepting and then resisting the other's word, the process of reverently heeding it while at the same time ridiculing it."¹⁷ By virtue of the opening invocation, Stevens makes François Villon his poetic "uncle," aligns his poem with the earlier text, and identifies it with the embedded sacred character of the source he has quoted. But by means of what Bloom called "ferocious irony," he distances his work from the earlier text and rejects the

substance of the thing he mocks. Stevens is engaged in discourse and disavowal at the same time in this stanza of "Monocle," using parody in the role of "double agent" (if one may borrow the term from R. P. Blackmur and the CIA).

The two verses that immediately follow the opening quotation state the central theological problem posed in "Monocle." After the hard rain of negatives, which in one sense act to positively cancel each other out (*not* nothing . . . *never* nothing), there follows a more tranquil reflection:

And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?

Notice the sequential repetition of "mocked," which first seizes the attention and directs it to the past, and then—like the quotation of a quotation—sets up a meditative echo-chamber entirely appropriate to a poet who has just introduced into the world of his poem an echoing series of intercessions. As Vendler has noted, the poem does concern "energies of faith and love," their depletion and replenishment. Without precluding a reference to personal relations, however, these verses clearly extend beyond the single sense of a man taking his wife to task. The remembering mind in the poem, about to wish it were a "thinking stone," is dealing with a cosmic sense of loss. Under cover of the rhetoric of cynicism, these two lines about mockery—one a statement, end-stopped, and the other a questioning of that statement—set forth various aspects of the single great question of faith: trust in others; belief in oneself; faith in a divine "Other." Stevens is dealing here with contemporary problems of alienation and identity. Nowhere more than here does Stevens capture so well the paradigm of human disillusion.

The "she" who is invoked, and mocked, and denied "in magnificent measure," is an imperfect human woman seen in the shadow of the perfect divine woman. As every Medievalist knows, the Queen of Heaven is also the Empress of Hell, "*Emperiere des infernaulx paluz*." Stevens has thus established the universality of the ideal while indicating the bitterness of disillusion. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," the imagery of the infernal marshes exists, not as an epithet in the invocation, but as the psychological terrain of the entire poem. It takes the versatile agent of parody to work this quagmire without sinking, to keep a foothold in both the celestial and infernal regions at once, and to arrange—in the capacity of double agent—the rendezvous of the present with the past.

Just a word, before leaving "Monocle," to establish the presence of Villon in the poem. The character of Stevens' poem, in which a man approaching his fortieth year takes stock of his life—and leave of his youth—reflects Villon's satiric *Testament* which begins: "In the thirtieth year of my age/ Having drunk my fill of shame," after which the poet laments his lost youth ("*Je plains le temps de ma jeunesse*") and declares himself on the verge of old age ("*Jusques a l'entree de vieillesse*"). In stanzas excluded from "Monocle," Stevens refers to "Poets of pimpnel, unlucky pimps/ Of pomp, in love and good ensample" (OP 19), which is as close as you can come to Villon without naming him. In the second stanza

of "Monocle," the will and testament theme is picked up in, "I am a man of fortune, greeting heirs." Finally, in the eighth stanza, Stevens makes parodic reference to Villon's famous "Ballade of the Hanged," sometimes known as "Villon's Epitaph." The hanged men of the medieval ballade who (in Swinburne's translation)¹⁸ are "more pecked of birds than fruits on garden wall," become in Stevens' poem the middle-aged couple who "hang like warty squashes":

Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

(CP 16)

In "Monocle," parodic play ranges from major chords of "magnificent measure" to a fugal inversion of Villon's hanging theme, grotesquerie in a minor key. It is not until the "Ozymandias" canto in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (II. viii)—composed nearly a quarter-century later—that one discovers Stevens using parody deliberately as a medium of integration, or at least as the element in which divergent impulses can safely meet. This canto is hedged with irony and deeply erotic, but it also projects the reopening of discourse with something mystical and long disavowed. It presents an aesthetic question in theological terms by comparing the mystery of poetic invention to the mystery of the Annunciation. Beyond all this, Stevens' parodic genius struts out in a bold *divertissement* in this passage, with all the theatrical panoply, the jewels and feathers—and the sublime deadpan delivery—of the classic American burlesque "number."

The canto that Stevens called "the poem about Ozymandias" unfolds, like Shelley's original poem about Ozymandias, as a narrative account of an exchange between a traveller and a broken monument—in this case, the monument of Romantic poetry. And, like the Angel of the Annunciation, Stevens' *Nanzia Nunzio* arrives on the scene with the express purpose of initiating an intimate sort of discourse. Although the interchange takes the form of a conversation, the burden of discourse is invested, not in *Ozymandias*, but in the would-be "spouse" who comes to confront him. In the figure of *Nanzia Nunzio*, however, there is more than immediately meets the eye. For one thing, the Annunciation implied in the name turns out to be a paradoxical sort of revelation: although the "announcement" is accompanied by a slow strip in the finest Burlesque tradition, the substance of the message is that there is no such thing as nakedness. And although Stevens introduces *Nanzia Nunzio* as a woman, the inflections of the bisexual name and the symbolism implicit in the messenger's characteristics suggest that the "contemplated spouse" is something more than a woman. In some important way she is androgynous. Again, while Stevens is clearly playing on the sexual overtones of the Annunciation, this canto presents radical departures from the original script. In truth, the twenty-one lines that constitute the canto introduce one of the most baffling, ambiguous, and sensuous figures in Stevens' poetry—and a superbly parodic figure:

On her trip around the world, Nanzia Nunzio
Confronted Ozymandias. She went
Alone and like a vestal long-prepared.

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
And laid it on the sand. As I am, I am
The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
Beyond the burning body that I bear.

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness, standing here before an inflexible
Order, saying that I am the contemplated spouse.

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
In its own only precious ornament.
Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.

Clothe me entire in the final filament,
So that I tremble with such love so known
And myself am precious for your perfecting.

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
Is never naked. A fictive covering
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

(CP 395-96)

In her circling "trip around the world," and in her vestal or virginal quality, the figure corresponds to the moon. Her light is reflected light, suggested by the sparkle of jewels and the shine of gold; her "nakedness" is complete when she is "divested of bright gold." On the other hand, her "burning body" is clearly a solar symbolism and its erotic force stands in counterpoise to the sense of constraint that attends the "vestal long prepared." By the end of the third tercet, then, we find that the characteristics of the two heavenly bodies that exert most influence on the earth have been made to coincide in the person of the "contemplated spouse."

Her name, divided neatly into two distinct halves, also represents two distinct but interpenetrating sets of characteristics. *Nanzia* bears a feminine inflection but also suggests a "Nancy," an effeminate or homosexual male. *Nunzio* has a masculine ending and literally designates a Papal emissary. But the name begins with "Nun," which conveys the idea of the chaste bride and the notion of "taking the veil." Thus *Ozymandias*—a standing parody of Shelley's monumental irony—is confronted by a figure whose name is replete with theological implications,

whose gender is curiously dual, and who seems intent upon stripping herself "more nakedly/ Than nakedness" itself. This creature seductively refers to itself as the "contemplated spouse."

This last is the most heavily loaded term of all, because it points directly to the lyric eroticism of the *Song of Songs*, to the Bridegroom of Hebrew allegorical exposition, and to the holy union of *Sponsus* and *sponsa* in the tradition of Christian mysticism. The ambivalence that Stevens imparts to the gender of his emissary is a reminder, too, that the Bridegroom of speculative theology is the object of contemplation for both monk and nun. It follows a tradition going back to classical times, and the classical languages, in which the human soul is invested with a feminine nature, or at least with a feminine grammatical gender.

In the most general interpretation, the scene in the desert represents a confrontation of the "canonical body" of accepted works by a living creative impulse. In a more specific sense, the passage describes a serious flirtation with Romanticism. There is the seductive approach to discourse, the frustrating desire for union, the possibility of aesthetic integration. *Nanzia's* flaming body indicates an *inventio* of power, and aesthetic of great worth. It is the emblematic rendering of what Stevens called, in "Esthétique du Mal," the "genius of the body;" although in this canto it requires "the spirit's diamond coronal" for completion.

In the most private, and most limited, reading, the poet is himself the dynamic messenger who confronts the poetry of the immediate past, the petrified canon, and who asserts a Coleridgean "I AM" again and again in the canto, six times in all (seven, if we count the "myself am" of the sixth stanza). In this reading, *Nanzia Nunzio* announces Stevens' own confrontation of the Romantic tradition and, through intentional parody, his assumption of the Romantic temper. Stevens' earlier figure of "the Youth as Virile Poet" (NA 39-67) is here reallocated, with some amusement, in the figure of the nubile stripper. And the "dual person" inherent in the imaginative, creative act is embodied both in the double identity of the messenger, and in the mocking echo of her double "I am": "As I am, I am/ The spouse."

The mingling of aesthetic, erotic, and theological elements is apparent in the "Ozymandias" canto in "Notes." But it is the parodic reference to Shelley's sneering monarch that governs its tone and underscores Stevens' quizzical relation to the Romantics. If the body of Romantic poetry and thought stands as an inflexible established Order, the androgynous *Nanzia Nunzio* is eminently flexible, exquisitely plastic, and it is her "burning body" that supplies vital energy to the desert scene. The power of this canto derives, not from its emblems, its elegance, or its allegorical significance, but from its infusion of erotic energy. But it is the parodic recall of the Scriptural Annunciation that lends to the canto its dimension of depth. For behind the figure of *Nanzia Nunzio*, Stevens has summoned up the image of a red-robed Archangel kneeling reverently before the chosen woman, holding a lily in place of the ancient herald's wand, and conveying to her the gracious news of the divine Salutation.

¹For readings of the theological nuances in "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," see Daniel Fuchs, *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 62-93; and Louis H. Leiter, "Sense and Nonsense: Wallace Stevens' 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,'" *College English*, XXVI (April 1965), 551-554.

²*Letters of Wallace Stevens*. ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 428. Further references will be cited in the text with the abbreviation *LWS*. References to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957); and *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage-Knopf, 1951) will be cited in the text with the abbreviations *CP*, *OP*, and *NA* respectively.

³M. M. Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin & London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 41-83.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 69. Also see *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*, eds. D. B. Wyndham Lewis & Charles Lee (London: Dent, 1930, 1948), which includes wonderfully dreadful numbers by Crashaw, Cowley, Byron and Poe, along with Wordsworth's "Owl."

⁶*CP*, pp. 75, 178.

⁷Stevens, incidentally, owned an edition containing both Southey's *A Vision of Judgment* and Byron's parody, *The Vision of Judgment*, printed back-to-back by Maynard & Bray in 1932. See Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 2 (Fall 1978), 60.

⁸*Op. cit.*, Fuchs, p. 2.

⁹I should note that Stevens' "Negation" is a parodic reflection of Coleridge's poem of the same name; the blind God of Stevens' poem becomes the parody of a parody if it is understood to echo Coleridge's sightless titan Watcher. For a useful commentary on Stevens' "Negation," see Adelaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 102-103.

¹⁰Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), vol. VIII, pp. 108-109.

¹¹*Op. cit.*, Leiter, p. 551.

¹²See Glenn G. MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens & Company: The Harmonium Years 1913-1923* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983) for a view of a probable living model for Stevens' "uncle" in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," (pp. 70-75). MacLeod points to Donald Evens, who wore a monocle and died at the age of 39, and whose "Sonnets From the Patagonian," says MacLeod, manifest "the pose of the dandy-aesthete which informs 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.'"

¹³This is Joan Richardson's unpublished dissertation, "Wallace Stevens: The Poet and His Critics" (CUNY, 1974); see p. 481.

¹⁴Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 37.

¹⁵Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 58.

¹⁶*Le Testament Villon, édité par Jean Rychner et Albert Henry* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1974), vol. I, p. 79. The ballade is subtitled as follows: "Ballade: Que Villon fait a la requeste de sa mère, pour prier Nostre Dame."

¹⁷*Op. cit.*, Bakhtin, p. 78. Bakhtin notes the prevalence of *parodia sacra* in medieval France, pointing out that quotation from the Bible, Gospels, Church Fathers, etc., "continually infiltrate medieval literature . . . beginning at one pole with the pious and inert quotation that is isolated and set off like an icon, and ending at the other pole with the most ambiguous, disrespectful, parodic-travesty use of a quotation" (p. 69).

¹⁸Ruth Z. Temple, in *The Critic's Alchemy: A Study of the Introduction of French Symbolism into England* (New York: Twayne, 1953), discusses Swinburne's translations of Villon (pp. 93-97).

Penelope's Creative Desiring: "The World as Meditation"

LOREN RUSK

In "The World as Meditation"¹ Wallace Stevens parallels Penelope the lover and Enesco the musician to remind us that love is desiring, and creation is loving action. Thus creation, for the creator, is not attainment but the self-sustaining operation of desire.

The artist strives to claim and transform the otherness of the world but can connect with the beloved only in moments of "sudden rightness" (*CP* 240). Hence the artistic psyche must remain in a state of perpetual devotion—study and openness—to the other. Joseph Riddel comments that in Stevens' work "Desire is satisfied by knowing the proximate, never the ultimate, satisfaction."² A sense of attainment would halt the desire that keeps art and love alive. It would immobilize the "ever-changing" allure of the beloved³ and end the delight of aspiring.

When Stevens' Penelope envisions the state of happily-ever-after, she withdraws as from an emotional dead end.⁴ First her meditation yearningly builds to an image of romantic closure: "His arms would be her necklace/ And her belt, the final fortune of their desire"; and then it turns abruptly away from the finality of that triple clasp. Penelope dissolves her fantasy with the literal-minded objection "But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun . . .?" This sequence is not, as it might seem, a portrayal of illusion succeeded by doubt, because Penelope never literally believes her husband is arriving. She simply allows herself, in her dawn reverie, a fantasy of reunion. The questions that follow her projection of a "final fortune" do not indicate Penelope's need to dose herself with reality but rather to deconstruct a vision that has reached stasis. Unravelling the ending makes her feel particularly alive; she feels the excitement of ambiguity pulsing within her. Through structurally inconclusive musing, her creative desire seeks its continuance.

We have seen Penelope, in Homer, as a continual creator and decreator at her loom. Stevens' choice of such an outwardly still figure for an artist analogue both emphasizes the need for receptivity and gives precedence to introspective process rather than concrete making. Accordingly, in the epigraph, Enesco values mental work over physical. He says that, for composing, the exercise of meditation has proved more essential than that of violin practice. Stevens presents meditation, then, as the primary imaginative activity, by which we elaborate, transform, and affirm our experience, and the process at the root of artistry.⁵

Thus Stevens' Penelope is fundamentally akin to the singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1934, *CP* 128), although Penelope does her creating in the mind.⁶ Even this difference is only a matter of emphasis, because the singer's "product," like thought, constantly changes, and Penelope's process ends with her speaking aloud. Since the later Stevens' interests are more cerebral, he merely suggests the idea of Penelope's weaving, with references to cloth and mending.

Instead of dwelling on physical fabric, he depicts Penelope's fabrication of Ulysses, a "form of fire," an idealization (emphasis added).

Penelope recreates Ulysses constantly, that is, faithfully and obsessively; and the idea of him, like the sun, nourishes her. With this constant creative activity Penelope composes her world as does the singer at Key West, who

was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang.

.....

. . . there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

(CP 129-30)

While several critics have commented on Penelope's extraordinary "belief" in Ulysses,⁷ I prefer the term *faithfulness* because it connotes activity rather than a fixed state. Penelope's faithfulness is energetic meditation, a secular version of the religious exercise through which faith may be continuously renewed.⁸ Penelope is forever returning to the idea of Ulysses, whom she envisions forever returning to her. The last lines portray her constancy as active aspiration: "She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair, / Repeating his name with its patient syllables, / Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near."

In its images of incantation and the combing woman, and most importantly in its use of participles, the concluding stanza recalls Stevens' definitive "Of Modern Poetry" (1940, CP 239).⁹ Both poems create an increasing sense of ongoing activity with a series of present participles that occur more frequently in the final lines. And the activity in both works is explicitly meditative. The connectedness of the two poems illumines each and helps us perceive the interdependence of creative thinking and desire.

Stevens tells us that the modern poem is of process; it is a performance. It projects "Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses" (CP 240). Since both self and world are continually in flux, a poetic statement can be "right" only for an instant; the poet always needs a fresh revelation. Ephemeral poetic satisfactions perpetuate desire, as do fleeting sexual and romantic fulfillments. Always "in the act of finding" (CP 239), Stevens' prototypic modern poem cannot arrive at a "final fortune," because it is a process of desire.

"The World as Meditation," then, is Stevens' "finding of a satisfaction" (CP 240), even as it is about Penelope's finding and seeking. (The concepts of finding and seeking become virtually interchangeable in Stevens' work.) This mirroring reveals Penelope as a counterpart of the poet.

Stevens draws upon all the meanings of the words *composed* and *compositeur* to first evoke and then characterize poetic activity. The French term in the epigraph subtly suggests poetry because it relates to both words and music, denoting "compositor" or "typographer" as well as "composer." The echo in the beginning of stanza three—"She has composed, so long a self"—links

Enesco and Penelope while underscoring the idea of composing. "To compose," in its various senses, means "to arrange," "to fashion," "to think up," "to calm," all of which contribute significance to the poem. Penelope composes in the sense of selecting and putting together impressions of external reality to constitute her world. She also mentally fashions "a self with which to welcome" the other, and imagines a Ulysses creating a self for her. To do all this the poetic thinker must "compose herself" in the sense of achieving a meditative, receptive state.

A passage in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) depicts creation as a relaxing, in which the intellect suspends its force of will; opens itself to the world, allowing exterior beauty to act upon it; and finds itself acting organically, in conjunction with nature:

Perhaps
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
A definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty, a rest
In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.

(CP 386)

Both this passage and "The World as Meditation" portray an occurrence in which the subject cannot be simply termed active or passive. They depict the creative process as activity within stillness. "The World as Meditation" redescribes the mingling of mind and nature, shifting the emphasis to desire, an element nearly submerged in the earlier passage. The erotic tone of the later work freshens our understanding of thought as that which generates from the self, having been conceived by the connecting of self and world. Penelope thinks in an erotic manner, at once languid and vibrant. Stevens parallels her thinking to Nature's "inhuman meditation" because for him poetic creation is necessarily organic, no matter how abstract the content.

Involved in the gratification of process, Stevens' Penelope contrasts tellingly with the Penelope of tradition. Gratification is entirely deferred for Homer's heroine, who weeps and "waste[s] away at the inward heart."¹⁰ Penelope works as Stevens' persona for the creative thinker not only because she is a weaver and unweaver and a figure of the active stillness that is constancy. With the selection of Penelope Stevens also sets up a conventional state of deprivation—in order to deny sorrow, the expected emotional content.¹¹ The poem offers not merely hope but the glimmering sense of a fulfillment which, like desire, recurs constantly. Thus Stevens illustrates his view of life as a "poverty" that is nevertheless grand, because it is not a static state but "living changingness" (CP 380), a glorious striving impelled by deprivation.

In an illuminating review of Stevens' career, J. Hillis Miller explains that an awareness of the "evaporation of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens' thought and poetry." In Stevens' later poems, Miller points out,

The word or the idea of nothingness comes back more and more often The rock of reality . . . has come from nothingness, its source still defines it. . . . Man in a world where reality is nonentity "has his poverty and nothing more" (CP 427). Such a man is defined as "desire," and is "always in emptiness that would be filled" (CP 467).¹²

The singer's aloneness at Key West represents the aloneness of each of us, and Penelope's poverty is everyone's. No divine spirit inhabits the world; the water is "wholly body." The grand guardians of humankind "came to nothing" (OP 206). Penelope has to take care of herself: "No winds like dogs watched over her at night." (*Dogs* can be transposed here to *gods*, à la Joyce.) We must each create our own order and make significant "The meaningless plungings of water and the wind." This empty existential realm becomes the theater in which the imagination weaves because "it has to find what will suffice" (CP 240). Penelope's meditation, which parallels Nature's processes, is as essential to her continuance as natural cycles are to the world. The planet encourages Penelope's constant composing precisely by its lack of concern; we are all we have.

Yet this existence without divine intervention, in which we ourselves must provide the coherence, is not cause for grief. The thought "No winds like dogs watched over her" is followed by "She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone." The juxtaposition affirms that humanity "will suffice." Humanity is characterized by imaginative action, the motions of mind through which we can fulfill ourselves. Louis L. Martz describes "Stevensian meditation" as "attentive thinking about [earthly] things with the aim of developing an affectionate understanding of how good it is to be alive."¹³ In "The Sail of Ulysses," written two years after "The World as Meditation," Ulysses muses on the paradox of our fortunate deprivation (a fortunate fall into lucid secularity). He considers

The self as sibyl, whose diamond,
Whose chieftest embracing of all wealth
Is poverty, whose jewel found
At the exactest central of the earth
Is need.

Ulysses shows that the spirit's ongoing desolation makes possible its grandeur, a grandeur of process:

Need names on its breath

Categories of bleak necessity,
Which, just to name, is to create
A help, a right to help, a right
To know what helps and to attain,
By right of knowing, another plane.

(OP 104)

Repetition of the words *help* and *right* suggests the necessary virtue of the process, and the enjambments create, amid solemn phrases, a sense of organicity and exhilarating momentum.

Stevens' concept of fulfillment in deprivation stands out in sharper relief when we compare "The World as Meditation" with Tennyson's related work. Whether or not Stevens meant this contrast, he paid attention to Tennyson;¹⁴ and the Victorian poet provides types that Stevens' poem recasts. Comparison with "The Lady of Shalott," in particular, helps to illumine distinctive qualities of Stevens' poem. (I will mention Tennyson's "Ulysses" further on.) Like Penelope, Tennyson's female artificer, who also stays home and weaves, is excited to perceive her adventurer approaching. Penelope, as we have seen, is related to Stevens' singer; Tennyson's Lady sings as well as weaves; and both poems, like "The Idea of Order," concern the artist's role and the intersecting of imagination and reality.

Against this common ground, fundamental differences appear. Most obviously, in Stevens' poem Ulysses is manifest only in Penelope's imagination, while Lancelot actually arrives, a representative of the outer world, a flesh and blood knight with ringing armor. For the Lady, Lancelot is "real life" exerting an attraction that subverts art. "[H]alf sick of shadows," the Lady expresses ambivalence toward the artist's removed stance. She throws over the world of shadows, the reflections of life that she retranslates in her tapestry, for the hope of direct, sensuous contact with the outside world. Yet, ironically, when the Lady enters the world, she further loses touch with it. The river, in contrast to her "mirror clear," has grown "dim"; and the Lady's gaze turns inward. The amorous desire that impels her flight from the studio destroys her; she dies a virginal, Ophelia-like death. Penelope, on the other hand, is renewed by her desire, which fuels rather than terminates her creative activity. Moreover, Penelope is able to meet, momentarily to possess, her fictive Ulysses as the Lady can never meet Lancelot. Penelope experiences an erotic and spiritual mingling, a merging of self and world, of desire and sunwarmth. Both women remain solitary, but while "The Lady of Shalott" is about division, Stevens' poem is about union. Stevens refuses the opposition of imagination and reality. Penelope has her experience; experience occurs and thus is real. It is the meeting and fusion of the imagination with the world.

Stevens' late philosophical attitude, which we find embodied in this poem, is summarized by Miller, who writes:

At first, after the dissolution of the gods, it seemed that Stevens was left, like post-Cartesian man in general, in a world riven in two, split irreparably into subject and object, imagination and reality. . . . But as his work progresses, Stevens comes more and more to discover that there is after all only one realm, always and everywhere the realm of some new conjunction of imagination and reality. . . . The later Stevens is beyond metaphysical dualism, and beyond representational thinking. In his late poems it is no longer a question of some reality which already exists out there in the world, and of which the poet then makes an image. . . . There is only one ever-present existence: consciousness of some reality. Imagination is reality, or, as Stevens says: "poetry and reality are one."¹⁵ . . . As he puts it in the title of a very late poem: "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination"(OP 110).¹⁶

Forty-five years before "The World as Meditation" Stevens was already asserting the reality of imagined things. Significantly, this early demonstration of his later poetic convictions occurs in a love letter. To Elsie Moll, his future wife, Stevens writes, "I know you are in my thoughts, because I can see you and hear you there" (L 95). This is certainly "the finding of a satisfaction" when one is deprived. Desire gives imagination the force to supplant exterior reality.

Hence it is fitting that much later, when Stevens poetically expresses his view of creative desiring, romantic love is his vehicle. (And because the motions of Penelope's imagination derive, at least in part, from the experience of Stevens-in-love, the work also coheres when read on its uppermost level, as a love poem.)

Parts of Stevens' letter illustrate the interdependence of love and composing, a relation "The World as Meditation" makes explicit. The two writings resemble each other not in style but in thought patterns. In the letter, as in the poem, sense perceptions of the weather intermingle with longing for the beloved. (Weather and the beloved are connected by their otherness. Moreover, sun in the poem and winter in the letter are, like the beloved, absent presences.) Stevens writes: "There is a noise on my windows as if it had started to rain. Poor March! Poor Elsie! You are so glad that winter is gone—" Stevens composes Elsie, "and then it isn't. But it is; for the cold is gone," he communicates with the Elsie he has created, "and a few days will melt everything," a seductive suggestion resembling "winter is washed away." Stevens goes on to replace exterior reality with an imagined state: "Suddenly the idea of a hay-field comes into my head and I imagine myself lying on a pile of hay," he composes himself, "watching swallows flying in a circle," an image of mobile completeness; note also the pile-up of present participles at the end, as in "Of Modern Poetry" and "The World as Meditation." Concluding, "Let that be my last thought to-night" (L 96-97), Stevens has found gratification in an imaginative act similar in kind to Penelope's solitary communion with the idea of Ulysses. Stevens' and Penelope's alter ego, the composer Enesco, says, "I live a permanent dream that does not cease night or day." This dreaming is precisely the "conjunction of im-

agination and reality" that Miller discusses. It is the self's continual reimagining of reality, which is for Stevens an ongoing act of devotion.

We have found Penelope to be the dreamer, the poetic thinker in this work. What then does the absent presence of Ulysses signify? Penelope's imagination metamorphoses Ulysses as she thinks about him, and no original or memory of the original is available in the poem. The one whom she awaits is momentarily conceived as a being who has tangible, embracing arms, but throughout most of the poem we do not hear of Ulysses simply as a man. The relative pronoun "that" in the last line—"him that kept coming"—suggests that he is an abstraction rather than a person. He is "A form of fire," an idea or shape of that which continually changes its shape; a mood, a "savage presence." There is, in effect, no Ulysses beyond the idea of Ulysses.

The poem teases us into wanting to define Ulysses, only to prove that he cannot be concretized. This is a Stevensian technique of long standing, used, for instance, in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917, *CP* 92). Stevens does not believe in static symbols. Hence the blackbird cannot be said to "stand for" one idea. Yet it "is involved/ In what I know"; it has to do with imagination.

Like the word *blackbird*, *Ulysses* fluctuates in significance. Ulysses resembles the sun; therefore he has to do with nature, in particular with energy rather than matter, motion rather than thingness. He is analogous to that which affords illumination, sustenance, and passion-enabling heat. *Ulysses*, we find, denotes an experience or complex of experiences rather than an entity.

The idea of Ulysses involves not simply exterior reality or otherness but, more, a sensing or realization of otherness.¹⁷ To realize something one must recreate, internalize it. The Ulysses for whom Penelope longs, the fulfillment apprehended only as it disappears again ("Yet they had met") is, finally, realization of oneself through the otherness of the world.

This unifying realization can occur only in transitory moments of sudden rightness. Miller refers to the striving for moments of union as, simply, being. He says that for Stevens the human experience of deprivation "is the supreme victory, for the nothing is not nothing. It is. It is being. Being is the universal power, visible nowhere in itself, and yet visible everywhere in all things." Miller goes on to discuss Stevens' problem of poetically conveying his sense of being:

To speak directly of this apperception, to analyze it, is almost inevitably to falsify it, to fix it in some abstraction, and therefore to kill it. Though man participates in being, he does not confront it directly. . . . The best we can do is "to realize/ That the sense of being changes as we talk" (*OP* 109), and go on talking in the hope that . . . we shall have another evanescent insight into being.¹⁸

Stevens demonstrates being through the elusiveness of the terms of the poem, particularly of *Ulysses*. The technique fosters an experience in the reader analogous to Penelope's striving for the fulfillment of grasping—both apprehending and momentarily possessing—otherness.

The reason, then, that Ulysses cannot be pinned down is that he has to do with the process of desire and striving which is being. We discover this because "The interminable adventurer"—always alien, uncapturable, stimulating—undergoes a metamorphosis. Beginning as the exterior love object in the first line, he develops into the loved creation of Penelope's "August Imagination" ("his self for her, which she imagined"), and finally becomes her desire itself.

Throughout the poem, as the significance of Ulysses grows more general and diffuse, the character of Penelope gains in complexity. She absorbs the idea of him like the heat of the sun. The meditating woman becomes herself luminous, a fertile image-maker. The thought that Ulysses and the warmth of the sun are different yet somehow interchangeable quickens her, "beating in her like her heart." With this image Stevens portrays Penelope's sense of being pregnant with the metaphor she has engendered.¹⁹

Penelope generates and encompasses both her self and the other. They grow together in her mind; the language makes them sound like twins: "Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend." Stevens' love letter shows his awareness, much earlier, that what we have of the other is the way we imagine that otherness. In the letter as in the poem, the repetition and symmetry of language suggest a mingling of identities: "you are more perfectly yourself to me when I am writing to you, and that makes me more perfectly myself to you" (L 96).

The adverb *more* in Stevens' declaration emphasizes the desire ever present in love. Like creativity, love is always reaching for further consummation. The words with which "The World as Meditation" ends, "him that kept coming constantly so near," tell us that there is to be no culmination; a vision of perfection always beckons the lover/ creator. Loving and creating are energetic processes of perfecting. The strength they demand and renew is "barbarous," a strength that rejoices in itself, "The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,/ As things emerge[] and move[] and [are] dissolved"(OP 110).

Penelope's constancy, the incessant inner activity of cyclic construction and deconstruction, parallels the continual motion of the Ulysses portrayed by both Homer and Tennyson. Like that legendary wanderer, Stevens' meditating creator lusts after fresh impressions. In the spirit of Tennyson's Ulysses, "yearning in desire," Stevens' Penelope could also say, of her mental explorations: "all experience is an arch wherethro' Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades/ For ever and for ever."

Stevens' own Ulysses in "The Sail of Ulysses" becomes, like Penelope, a mental traveller, another persona for the artistic thinker, "the true creator . . . the thinker/ Thinking gold thoughts in a golden mind" (OP 100). Desire similarly impels his meditation, as he yearns toward

A life beyond this present knowing,
.....
Not to be reached but to be known,
Not an attainment of the will

But something illogically received,

.....
... misgivings dazzlingly
Resolved in dazzling discovery.

(OP 101-102)

This Ulysses resembles Penelope in that what he desires is an irrational revelation, self-created, both accomplished and received by the imagination.

Stevens' merging of the two personae does not indicate that the eschews male/ female stereotypes. "The World as Meditation" is certainly a more sensuous and associative poem, "Sails" more assertive and discursive. And generally throughout his work Stevens seems to accept without difficulty conventional views of gender difference. What is significant is that traditional gender attributes merge in the figure of the creator (in "The Idea of Order" as well). By this use the stereotypes with which Stevens normally concurs come to be transcended. Stevens chooses the classical figures of Ulysses and Penelope, an especially adventuresome, protean man and an especially passive, stable woman, and then brings each closer to an androgynous center, in order to portray various aspects of the creative mind.

Hence in the penultimate stanza of "The World as Meditation," Penelope subsumes Ulysses. Stirred by the heady analogy that identifies Ulysses with the sun, Penelope seems suddenly no longer to yearn for reunion with the absent lover but rather to prefer figurative union.²⁰ She is excited by the vibrant double vision of metaphor, by the way one can say of its tenor: "It was Ulysses and it was not." Then she affirms that she and Ulysses have met—in the imagination, through her analogy, in the space between the words. Finally, Penelope incorporates Ulysses; no longer other, sun-like Ulysses becomes the force of her imaginative desire, "The barbarous strength *within her*" (emphasis added), the "Interior Paramour" (CP 524).

This dramatic turn alerts one to hints earlier in the poem that Ulysses is an aspect of the creator's soul. One must reevaluate the lines "A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope, / Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells." It becomes apparent that ambiguity about the referent of "whose" introduces the possibility that the crude, quickening power resides within the female artificer herself. Indeed Penelope partakes of natural power from the beginning; Stevens' diction reminds us that her weaving mimics the operations of nature, which breaks then "mends" the trees. And finally, one can see that Enesco's words predict at the outset Penelope's subsuming of Ulysses' elemental drive. The epigraph reveals the traveller as a lesser aspect of the creator, whose primary work is meditation.

Stevens' parallel of Penelope and Enesco is more than a lovely analogy that reveals the inner life of the artist; it emphasizes mental creation, which is everyone's province. Stevens treats the ways in which the human being composes his or her world, "The joy of meaning in design/ Wrenched out of chaos" (OP 100). Himself a maker of highly refined products, Stevens is nevertheless

more fascinated by imaginative process than by objects, goals, perfected things. For him this infinitely variable, desire-fueled process characterizes the human. We all participate, with more or less subtlety. Thus, though Stevens' work does not seek a wide audience, it expresses a peculiarly democratic view: there exists a potentially artistic thinker in each of us. Poems like "The World as Meditation" are not just self-reflexive pieces about poetry, using all the world merely as an analogy for artistic making. Ultimately the artist we find in Penelope becomes another figural analogue—for a general human ideal, the well-developed, ever-inventing imagination.

Stevens' version of Penelope, like Homer's, develops a moral in which the loveliness of the portrayal resides. Constancy, in each version, attests to beauty of spirit and is rewarded. However, Stevens depicts a constancy that is open to the world rather than constricted. Stevens' Penelope can, and indeed must, reward herself. She has the capacity to make herself whole, to encompass Ulysses the adventurer in her meditation. She is prototypic, a supreme fiction, reminding us of our own ongoing chance to awake and reinvent the world upon our inner stage.

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, "The World as Meditation" (1952), *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 520-521. The volume is hereafter referred to as *CP*, with page numbers cited in the text.

²Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 247.

³Riddel defines Ulysses as "that ever-changing thing itself for which the one longs" (p. 247).

⁴Throughout the poem an omniscient, impersonal narrator sympathetically renders Penelope's point of view.

⁵See Louis L. Martz for a related yet different view of how meditation and the imagination are connected. "Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation" in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 134. The article first appeared in *Literature and Belief: The English Institute Essays for 1957*, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 139-165.

⁶Not all Stevens critics view Penelope as an analogue for the artist, perhaps because Ulysses fills that role in "The Sail of Ulysses" and because Stevens was a man. However, there is general agreement that Stevens uses a woman as poet figure in "The Idea of Order at Key West." And it is hardly beyond Stevens to identify with Penelope's consciousness in one poem and Ulysses' in another; indeed, as Stevens conceives them, the two are much alike. (I discuss this further on in the essay.) Certainly Stevens explicitly parallels Penelope and the artist Enesco, the two meditators. Nevertheless, though Ulysses' consciousness is nowhere present in "The World as Meditation," James Baird, William Burney, and Frank Doggett identify Ulysses with the mind of the poet. See Burney, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 169; Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 287; Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 172. Doggett observes that "In other poems lover desiring beloved may be abstracted as the mind seeking reality, with the mind as lover and reality as beloved"; but he claims that "The World as Meditation" depicts "the longing of the object to be reached by the subject." I see no reason to reverse the terms in this instance. Since Penelope's is the subjective consciousness of the poem, she is necessarily the subject, the one who longs, and Ulysses the object of her longing. (See Riddel, note 3.)

Roy Harvey Pearce and Jon Rosenblatt, on the other hand, do see Penelope as a representative of the creative mind. Pearce says that for Penelope "The act of composition . . . is everything," and Rosenblatt calls her "Stevens' version of the poet searching for union with the physical world." See Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 414; Rosenblatt, "On Wallace Stevens' 'The World as Meditation,'" *NMAL*, 3 (1978), item 2. And Harold Bloom, though he obfuscates his position by referring to Penelope as a "muse" (Baird's concept), seems basically in accord with those who, like myself, read her as a creator figure. He writes: "the never-satisfied mind of Penelope is analogous to the mind of Stevens, hoping to find Ulysses or a new First Idea of the sun." See Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 363-364.

⁷See Sharon Cameron, "The Sense against Calamity': Ideas of a Self in Three Poems by Wallace Stevens," *ELH*, 43 (1976), 591; Martz, p. 134; Rosenblatt.

⁸See Martz, p. 134.

⁹Martz and Rosenblatt also note the link between the two poems. Rosenblatt writes: "'The World as Meditation' (1952) dramatizes the principles of meditation and composition that Wallace Stevens had earlier described in the much-anthologized 'Of Modern Poetry'. The subject of both poems is the poetic process." And Martz says that "Of Modern Poetry" defines "the genre of meditative poetry" (p. 143). He goes on to show how, to varying extents, both "The Idea of Order" and "The World as Meditation" demonstrate the process that "Of Modern Poetry" depicts:

All this seems to describe something very like the action in *The Idea of Order at Key West*: the landscape is the stage, the singer by the shore is the actor, and the poet's larger mind is the audience. (p. 144)

["The World as Meditation"] fulfills all of Stevens' requirements for this modern poetry: common speech, common images, common problems; the establishment of a stage, the placing of Penelope as actor on that stage, the imputed working of her meditative thoughts, along with the constant presence of the poet's larger mind, controlling all, and concluding all with an affectionate understanding of what will suffice. (p. 147)

¹⁰*The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richard Lattimore (1965; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1968), Book XIX, l. 136, p. 285.

¹¹John J. Enck agrees, noting that "In her deprivation this vigil comprises no negative." He sees Penelope as "living fully an existence which, in terms of life itself, can never be complete." See *Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 193.

¹²J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being" in *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 144, 155-157. The essay is reprinted from *ELH*, 31 (1964), pp. 86-105. Stevens' definitive discussion of the gods' dissolution occurs in "Two or Three Ideas," *Opus Posthumous* (1957; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. 206-207. The volume is hereafter cited in the text as *OP*.

¹³Martz, p. 147.

¹⁴*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 26. This volume is hereafter cited in the text as *L*.

¹⁵Stevens, "Three Academic Pieces," in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1942; rpt. New York: Random House, 1951), p. 81.

¹⁶Miller, p. 154.

¹⁷Doggett remarks that "many of Stevens' poems present the sun as realization of earth. . . . 'the invented world'" (p. 171).

¹⁸Miller, pp. 157, 159.

¹⁹Burney points out the maternal image in "The thought kept beating in her like her heart./ The two kept beating together" (p. 169).

²⁰Pearce also suggests this (see note 6), as does Cameron, who writes: "Penelope fills the world with the detail and extravagance of her desire. . . . one wonders whether Ulysses' presence might not crowd that world, whether there would be space enough in it for him" (pp. 591-592).

Stevens and Zen: The Boundless Reality of the Imagination

ROBERT R. TOMPKINS

Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true.¹

These lines reflect Wallace Stevens' lifelong struggle to attain, through his poetry, a true relationship to language, a self of language finally found, finally transformed; an awareness which, once achieved, would dissolve the illusory self, the false relation to language that appears as an "after image," beautiful but untrue. It is just this revolution within the self that implicitly guides Stevens' philosophic thought and that refines his sense of poetic truth, as he develops the possibilities of self-awareness through amazing mazes of reflection until, in the short poems of the very last years, his awareness radically alters and he simply moves in another dimension of meaning and in another experience of self. Western concepts drawn from religion, depth psychology, or philosophy cannot interpret Stevens' final realization simply because they presuppose that "later reasoning" which, at the end, he surpassed. In addition, deconstructive criticism is unable to interpret Stevens completely for, although the poet does ultimately dissolve all images produced by language in the free play of language itself, there is yet within that freedom an ultimate truth, a final finding, a source and original mind.

To trace this development I shall interpret three of Stevens' poems: "The World as Meditation," "Auroras of Autumn," and "The Rock" as extreme attempts which, in their failure to achieve transformation, reveal their limitations and open the poet to a "new knowledge" that we find profoundly expressed in his last, short poems. In order to interpret this last turning I shall borrow certain non-Western, specifically Buddhist, ideas and poems because that tradition is so familiar with this "enlightenment" and because it is so wary of falsely intellectualizing it. Further, as Buddhists find the origin of self and mind in "no self" and "no mind," such a view opens us to the illimitable insight of Stevens' last poems, while it also helps us to think through his development up to that point in terms of an "inner dialogue" of self and non-self, consciousness and unconsciousness, that evolves and involves the very structures of being within itself. Finally, besides so interpreting Stevens, I will also raise the question, for later consideration, of *how* it is that the self exists, both truly and falsely, in relation to language.

To begin, all Buddhist sects agree in a belief in "no self," that all things are void of any substantial, enduring, inner identity or essence. This belief applies to anything that can be named or thought. Thus, for example, what we call "physical bodies" lack not only a single inner regulating agency, a self, but also lack "physicality" as in inner essence or reality. So also "mind" is empty of both self and of consciousness which, like all essences, is a phenomenon, an appearance, akin

to dream. This is not to deny that we experience such apparent faculties as will, perception, and emotion; it is rather as if our experience itself were being produced by a variegated play of lights that, together with our belief in it, solidified into the appearance of substantial entities and of an enduring self. Because Buddhists, like Stevens, seek an ultimate awareness, they have extended the idea of "no self" literally to everything that can be thought or named. Thus an idealist might say that all beings, as appearances, exist only relative to thought; that they are thought forms. But what then is thought? It cannot be an essence, for then it would have self-identity, and it would ultimately "be." But nothing exists ultimately. It might also be said that all beings exist "in time," that they are transient and in flux, yet exist in and through patterns of temporal relationship and change. But time also lacks essence, for the very relationship of past, present, and future, for example, itself exists only phenomenally, as we reify it through memories, expectations, and a present perception based upon and confirming them.

Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world;
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud;
A flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.²

Thus literally "out of nothing" spread the forms and appear the entities of our world—bodies, minds, and their processes. For Stevens,

The resounding cry
Is like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down
To share the day. The trumpet supposes that
A mind exists, aware of division, aware
Of its cry as clarion, its diction's way
As that of a personage in a multitude:
Man's mind grown venerable in the unreal.

(CP 376-377)

For both, somehow, on the basis of an original supposition, there appears this plethora of beings and experiences, constituted by the play of "lights" as existence and non-existence, appearing in the contexts of space and time, themselves woven out of a pervasive and compulsive belief in their reality. This "resounding cry," this single, unique "world event," on the one hand, *appears* as extended into multiple, continuous dimensions of space, time, and mind, in which emerge the world's particulars who imagine these dimensions; and yet, on the other, it utterly lacks anything according to which it could appear or be thought. And it is this "Buddha Mind" that alternately constitutes either a boundless enjoyment of itself, or a continuous rumination on death—depending on one's relationship to "no self." It is this radical dichotomy, between the limitlessness of an "original mind" and the infinite complexity of a "later reasoning," with which we interpret our existence to ourselves via the mind's categories, that underlies and

drives Stevens' thought as he aesthetically analyzes the poetic image, the icon of the self, in an attempt to turn thought and language back on itself so as to reveal its origins in an original insight, a new and radically altered relation to language, thought, being, and time.

All Buddhist thinkers agree further that an immense, pervasive "suffering" adheres to the belief that mistakes its image/ beings for ultimate reality, thus mistaking its own origins and peculiar "reality." This suffering is rooted in our illusory perception of time as real. First, as beings of time, the integrity of the temporal self is destroyed by that which forms it. Thus in Stevens' poem "Madame La Fleurie,"

His grief is that his mother should feed on him, himself
and what he saw,
In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked in her
dead light.

(CP 507)

Second, this suffering lies in the irrational reaction to one's imagined death, as the mind savagely seeks to master and control its own existence, creating, ironically, the very appearance of time that is its suffering. Here again we find the self as an infinite complexity. It must, through its own, only means, thought, find a way of relating to its own activity so as to transform the appearance of that *same* activity from suffering to the largest enjoyment, illimitable power, and vast freedom, when its very activity is the source of its suffering. I stress "same" because to be "enlightened" is not a state separate from suffering, a heaven or bliss consciousness, for these too are insubstantial and unreal. It is rather an *emptying* that occurs in and through suffering, a shattering of the mind's illusion, that generates an ineffable freedom. So I read Stevens' "Course Of a Particular."

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by
wind,
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

The leaves cry . . . One holds off and merely hears the cry.
It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,

In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

(*OP* 96-97)

Read as an emptying, a stilling of the mind's attachment to its own existence as self, the voice of the poem dissolves into an ultimate peace, accompanying a boundless awareness of the non-existence of the condition previously perceived as suffering. And it is through just such an emptying of the mind's forms and images that the poet Stevens seeks to still that "later reason," that compulsive attachment to the mind's processes as real, that constitutes, as we shall see, a poetic and existential unconsciousness.

Let us begin tracing Stevens' "inner dialogue" of the self with the poem "World as Meditation," written in 1952, three years before his death. As the title suggests, the poem, and so the world, appears as an icon of the self as, "inner" meditation and "outer" appearance merge in a building union of self reference. The poem is self-referential in that the subjectivity of the poet, and reader, is mirrored by the poem's characters, Ulysses and Penelope.

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
The winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in
which she dwells.

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome
him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear
friend.

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.

(*CP* 520-521)

The poem's images, the trees, are mended, or healed, by a savage infusion of that presence, that ineffable quickening power that pervades every creative act—the mind's own power. The mind is being imagined as a twofold being, as a wild and formless power that can arise only in the poetic imagery that evokes it, a building union of the forms of the mind with its power. Here thought and an aroused subjectivity coincide. Thought is irradiated; subjectivity becomes intelligible. But this union is not unambiguous:

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her
heart.

The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

(CP 521)

Ulysses, this "form of fire," life's quickening within, cannot quite exist *in* the poem/ world, though he manifests *through* the poem/ world. "It was Ulysses and it was not." Their union, the interplay between thought and creative power, mirrors an interplay, in us, between our apprehension of meaning (Penelope) and a subjective act, an inner shifting, that occurs within this apprehension, making it possible. This doubled interplay focuses the "authentic" self-relationship in which subjective and objective worlds merge and which sustains and fulfills all meaning. This relationship, which exists ambiguously, "on the edge of the field," both within and beyond its meanings, is also rhythmic. "It was Ulysses *and* it was not," ". . . thought *beating* in her like her heart" (my italics). Ulysses, that interminable adventurer, the strength within that would never fail, is conceived as absolute power. And yet this "eternal" is *also* an experience arising and receding within an experience of time and change.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.

(CP 521)

The imagination of this eternal being constitutes the very being of time itself, a twofold turning, of thought back upon its own interiority or authenticity, that within all significance; and the expanding of this turning outward, into the developing enjoyment, through the poem's images, of this single, uniting awareness, this self. As one, the poem, world and self become an ambiguous, ephemeral presence, not *a* being *of* space and time, nor *of* the inner or outer world, but a transcending, immeasurable, non-localized being—"Being" itself.

Yet we must ask, no matter how perfectly the poem incarnates its insight, whether it is a final finding of the self. It is not enough to answer that these archetypes—Ulysses and Penelope—had to be imagined, that they are constructs of thought. For we know that, for Stevens, all reality has to be imagined, that truth lies in an ultimate imagination. But I do not think that this poem is ultimate, because its self-consciousness is being woven of the two aspects of its being that are themselves being imagined as "real" or ultimate. As archetypes, while these are being imagined, it is not clear either that or how they are imagined. They appear as "things in themselves," as absolutes, and thus they constitute an "other"

to the imagining consciousness. Indeed, they constitute an unconsciousness or non-self-consciousness of *this* self-consciousness. This in turn constitutes an opacity to and limitation of this self-consciousness in relation to its own making. This self, while it reflects the tremendous power of a thought and imagery that reflects itself, in terms of which it comes to be and is, is yet woven of a *prior* imagining that constitutes it as an "after image," a "later reason," and a form of time. Thus these meditations crucially raise the question of whether and how a self, which exists by imagining those forms and images through which it interprets and appears to itself, can ever penetrate that process in such a way as to bring it to consciousness.

There exists a religious or transcendental aspect to the thought of Stevens and of some, specifically Mahayana, Buddhists. Both develop personified symbols for transcendental forms of the being of the imagination. Because these do not exist in time, as beings subject to birth and death, but rather as forms which underlie all existence and make it possible, they naturally assume a religious connotation. Stevens' poem "The Auroras of Autumn" revolves three imagined dimensions of our being in the attempt to dissolve their apparent absoluteness in an insight that would finally reveal the making of the mind by unmaking its appearances as "other." Thus the poem revolves from the perspective of the ephebe, the poet in time; to that of the universal forms of the mind and of the world—the Mother; to that of the mind as origin of its forms—the Father. Unlike "The World as Meditation" this poem does not imagine a self of power, but a self having to face its annihilation and having to draw meaning, ultimately, from just that. Thus "Auroras" proceeds by emptying all that is of its imagined being, in the attempt to attain a prior innocence. While canto I introduces the idea of the poem through the image of the serpent, canto II initiates the "decreative" movement from the human perspective.

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.
The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.
He observes how the north is always enlarging the
change,

With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,
The color of ice and fire and solitude.

(CP 412-413)

This first image of the mind's imminent disaster is followed by that of the Mother, the archetype of the universe and of the mind, the House:

It is evening. The house is evening, half dissolved.
Only the half they can never possess remains,

Still-starred. It is the mother they possess,
Who gives transparence to their present peace.
She makes that gentler that can gentle be.

And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.
She gives transparence. But she has grown old.

.....

The house will crumble and the books will burn.
They are at ease in a shelter of the mind

And the house is of the mind and they and time,
Together, all together. . . .

(CP 413)

And third, the imagination, itself the serpent of canto I, flashing its skin to a wished for disappearance, form gulping after formlessness, imagines a yet more ephemeral being, the Father, mind as the solitary origin of its appearances, those "things that attend it," and of its own ultimate forms, its "actors."

He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes
To no; and in saying yes he says farewell.

He measures the velocities of change.

.....

In flights of eye and ear, the highest eye
And the lowest ear, the deep ear that discerns,
At evening, things that attend it until it hears

The supernatural preludes of its own,
At the moment when the angelic eye defines
Its actors approaching, in company, in their masks.

Master O master seated by the fire
And yet in space and motionless and yet
Of motion the ever-brightening origin,

Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown,
Look at this present throne. What company,
In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?

(CP 414-415)

Following this first devolution into the exalted yet tragic image of an awareness brought to face an abyss at the heart of its own making, the poem re-returns, in canto V, as do the Father and Mother, who invite humanity to the scene of its appearance and disappearance—time—the cycle of birth and death of universes, of cultures, and of individuals—this “loud, disordered mooch.” This meditation on time expands as canto VI shifts to a cosmic perception of the temporal universe as ephemeral, a

. . . theatre floating through the clouds,
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. . . .
.....

The theatre is filled with flying birds,
Wild wedges, as of a volcano’s smoke, palm-eyed
And vanishing, a web in a corridor

Or massive portico. A capitol,
It may be, is emerging or has just
Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed . . .
(CP 416)

For this destructured, collapsing image of time is nothing until

. . . in a single man contained,
Nothing until this named thing nameless is
And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.
(CP 416-417)

Here the complexity is building almost incredibly as the destructuring movement of universal time nothing is, is meaningless and unreal, until in a single man “contained,” which “will occur” when the *named* thing—time—*nameless* is and is destroyed, destroying its appearance, as well as the man, the being of time, who *is about to* encounter this. This passage figures that unimaginable “event” in which a being of time and the mind so opens to the deranging power that appears within its own making that it is unmade, whence it “contains” time, and existence assumes an entirely new significance.

The poem then moves again to the image of the Father as that “imagination” that sits enthroned, grim destroyer of existence, “the white creator of black, jet-

ted/ By extinguishings, even of planets as may be, // Even of earth, even of sight,
. . . [that] leaps through us" (CP 417), and who *changes* to become the serpent/
trickster who lies

In another nest, the master of the maze
Of body and air and forms and images,
Relentlessly in possession of happiness
(CP 411)

whose meditation "moved so slightly" to make sure of the sun, as a

. . . shape and mournful making move to find
What must unmake it and, at last, what can,
Say, a flippant communication under the moon.
(CP 418, my italics)

This developing poetic vision, exalted by and aspiring to the image of an ultimate self-consciousness surviving at the heart of time, *moves once more* to find that which will *unmake it*, or make it true—a saying, a poem, an uncaused word:

An innocence of the earth and no false sign

Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,
Lie down like children in this holiness,
As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
Created the time and place in which we breathed . . .
(CP 418-419)

This denouement, so innocently imagined, leads the mind beyond fear to the point of dread:

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?
Of what disaster is this the imminence:
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt?
.....
It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,
Almost as a part of innocence, almost,
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part.
(CP 419-420)

Existentially honest, Stevens beings thought beyond the comfort of its own images to the unknown, unimaginable transformation that is developing within

himself, back once more to the man. Subjectivity returns to itself, producer and therefore destroyer of the images with which it interprets itself, and by which it exists. Confronting his own unknown, Stevens awaits the "syllable without any meaning" that will "shatter the boat and leave the oarsmen quiet" (CP 516). That power within the imagination here assumes an even wilder guise, becomes an even deeper unknown, as the poem opens to the destructuring that constitutes its own poetic "being." Here the mind initiates a movement *beyond* its own reflection, beyond the poem as icon, emptying its archetypes of their ultimacy, thus bringing its unconsciousness, its unknown, "nearer" to consciousness. Its images begin to lose the capacity to reflect the self. And it experiences its unknown, its abyss, as dread.

But even this most acutely subjective experience of time, as dread, *still* assumes the reality of time as a power other than, albeit within, oneself. It is the unconsciousness of this "other," its quality as absolute unknown, that constitutes this consciousness as dread. It is also this perceived duality that underlies the poem "The Rock," written in 1950, in which being, the ground, is imagined as a barren, lifeless emptiness, in which the illusion of consciousness arises, creating the possibility of transformation, a *cure*, of the ground and of the self of the ground, a spiritualization, through the icon of the poem. This is again a dualistic image, presupposing an existing barrenness and its potential transformation by the mind, a "cure." In fact this poem marks the point of greatest tension in Stevens' thought. Here the being of time imagines itself as *evolving* toward a spiritualization or cure which, if true, must destroy not only its own current self-image but the very basis of that image, time, the apparent opposition by an inhuman other—the "not yet." Inasmuch as the "cure" has *not yet* occurred, nor could it, given its assumption of time as real, this poem remains an after image, contrived, lacking complete transparency, a relapse into the mind's suffering.

Some Buddhist notions clarify this and later developments in Stevens' poetry. In Mahayana Buddhism there are religious, transcendental personifications that closely parallel those of Stevens; for example, the concept of the "three bodies" of Buddha and of their psychic manifestations including Gotama himself, fill Buddhist religious life. Prayer and meditation upon them is believed to bring one into both magical and spiritual dimensions of being. However, in all sects, and particularly in Zen, the aspirant is urged to realize that all such transcendental powers and qualities of being are merely externalizations of his own unconscious, and that he must ultimately move beyond them. Thus the popular saying in Zen that one must slay the Buddha if he impedes one's self-awareness. Beyond these images are the notions of emptiness (*sunyata*) and suchness (*tathata*), which lie at the heart of Mahayana thought. Together they refer to that quality of "suchness" that pervades every gesture that is empty of "self," uniting all forms, levels, and appearances of being in its movement. This awareness is personified by the Bodhisattva, whose meditation has so thoroughly penetrated all forms of existence, including his or her own, that he stands open to infinite voidness, Nirvana; but who, paradoxically, has such compassion for all mind-created beings that, postponing his own entrance into Nirvana, he vows to continue his im-

aginary existence until all sentient beings are enlightened, fully aware that there *are* no sentient beings, and no becoming enlightened. This vow of the Bodhisattva expresses his insight into the "Middle Way" between being and non-being—that beings *are* not, but that to deny the world is also falsely to objectify it, an equally calamitous mistake. Because it "is not" the Bodhisattva's love of the world is infinite. Because time "is not" he incarnates endlessly through all time. The Middle Way, by eliminating such false imaginings as "levels of being" and "becoming enlightened," frees one to the structureless, infinite play of appearances, itself the ultimate truth of Buddha Mind, which arises "nowhere," entirely without "thought coverings," or categories of the mind.

It is during the last two or three years of his life that Stevens achieved the final unmaking of the mind. Most of the poems are short, direct, and simple. As usual they are autobiographical, but the voice has changed. In "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself" there is the "scrawny," timorous assertion that something has happened; a touch has come "from outside" the sun, perceived as a "new knowledge of reality." In "As You Leave the Room," an image of dying, the poet reviews his life, questioning its truth, and concludes with this verifying image. It is

. . . as if I left
With something I could touch, touch every way.

And yet nothing has been changed except what is
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.

(OP 117)

This is a direct statement of "awakening," of the realization that the poet's true thought both is and has been "part of a major reality," comprised within a "larger meditation"; and that its apparent separateness, doubt and estrangement, has been unreal, a dream, the awakening from which is as if nothing had changed at all, because it never had been. This radical awakening is also expressed in a Zen poem by Kosen:

A blind horse trotting up an icy ledge—
Such is the poet. Once disburdened
Of these frog-in-the-well illusions
The sutra stone's a lamp against the sun.³

In the poem "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" that power, earlier conceived as the poet's subjectivity (Ulysses) is now a river that flows everywhere, without a ferryman, who "could not bend against its propelling force"; a river "that flows nowhere, like a sea"; a river that is not separate from the appearances that tell of it:

The steeple at Farmington
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.
(CP 533)

Here, just as in Buddhist thought, as the mind's emptiness becomes absolute it becomes equally a fullness, a "suchness," a replete, undifferentiated enjoyment, a beauty, extending and knowing itself everywhere, Buddha Mind, "unreasonably and relentlessly in possession of happiness," which one can "touch, touch in every way." In another Zen poem by Bunan:

The moon's the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I've become the thingness
Of all the things I see!

(WB 343)

The Buddha Mind finds its realization in all the appearances it takes. All that "before" had been perceived as suffering "now" is seen as Buddha, Original Mind or Suchness. The mirror is more and more clear. And yet, one more rubbing and in "A Clear Day and No Memories":

No soldiers in the scenery,
No thoughts of people now dead,
As they were fifty years ago,
Young and living in a live air,
.....

Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness
And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense.

(OP 113)

And a poem from Shinicki Takahashi:

White cherry blossoms fall like snowflakes
In the wind. All at once,
Houses, people vanish, into silence.
Nothing moves. Streetcars, buses are held back
Silently. Quiet, everything.
All visible things become this nothingness.

(WB 359)

And yet even this poetic statement is, for Stevens, as for the Zen poet, too descriptive, too much an essence. In its expression there lingers the mind's image of voidness:

Beware of gnawing the ideogram of nothingness:
Your teeth will crack. Swallow it whole and you've a
treasure
Beyond the hope of Buddha and the Mind.
(Karasumam-Mitsuhiro, WB 354)

To slice through Buddhas, Patriarchs
I grip my polished sword.
One glance at my mastery,
The void bites its tusks!
(Daito, WB 347)

With one final move we come to a parting which the mind can simply, literally, no longer grasp. The most direct statements "Of Mere Being" pass beyond the mind, to a radical, poetic intuition, in which there is no longer any duality of thought, in which language has ceased to *refer* to anything at all.

Magnificent! Magnificent!
No-one knows the final word.
The ocean bed's aflame,
Out of the void leap wooden lambs.
(Fumon, WB 344)

Riding backwards this wooden horse
I'm about to gallop through the void.
Would you like to trace me?
Ha! Try catching a tempest in a net.
(Kukoku, WB 344)

How does one follow further? How can one speak about what is not *about* anything at all? And in Stevens' concluding poem "Of Mere Being:"

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

(OP 117-118)

Here in this final turn, beyond all thought, beyond all referential, logical sense, the poet's language returns to that original, single event in which, referring to nothing, language rings throughout all its images as an original mind; in which beings appear, without self, as manifestations or images of that original event; and in which a new self, a new style and a new awareness arise within language that moves utterly beyond any after-image or isolated preoccupation with one's fate or the world's. Stevens' poems thus provide us with a record of a way of thinking that is able to break its own code, solve its own puzzle, and move into a boundless reality of the imagination. It remains to re-think, if possible, our "understanding of being," in relation to language, in the light of accounts like those of Zen Buddhism and of Wallace Stevens.

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 418. Further references to this work will be cited in the text as *CP*. References to Stevens' *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957) will be cited in the text as *OP*.

²*Lotuses of the Mahayana*, trans. Kenneth Saunders; quoted in Christmas Humphreys, *The Wisdom of Buddhism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 122. For a sensitive and comprehensive introduction to various forms of Buddhism, the reader may wish to consult Nancy Wilson Ross, *Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

³Kosen, "Satori Poem," in *The World of the Buddha*, ed. Lucien Stryk (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Anchor Books Edition, 1969), p. 357. Further references to this work will be cited in the text as *WB*.

Unmasking and Masking Stevens' Aesthetic: Moore's Reviews of Stevens

CELESTE GOODRIDGE

On June 27, 1935, Marianne Moore wrote to T. S. Eliot regarding the introduction he had written for her *Selected Poems*: "You will be amused to note—whereas I am profoundly grateful for—the armor afforded me by your introduction to my book."¹ Given Eliot's established position, his seal of approval undoubtedly gave Moore a sense of protection. Adverse criticism that might follow would first have to contend with Eliot's recommendation. But what is important here is that Moore defines criticism as armor—as a device which protects or conceals her poems from the public. Implicitly, then, the critic acts as a buffer, or mediator, between her work and the public that receives it.

When Moore reviews Wallace Stevens' poetry between 1924 and 1964, she sees herself, at least in part, as a mediator between his work and "the crass reader."² This mediation, however, is more complicated than one might expect. For although Moore accepts and even praises Stevens' distance from his public, she nevertheless voices an occasional uneasiness about his impenetrability. In a letter to William Carlos Williams in 1944, she confides:

Wallace Stevens is beyond fathoming, he is so strange; it is as if he had a morbid secret he would rather perish than disclose and just as he tells it out in his sleep, he changes into an uncontradictable judiciary with a gown and a gavel and you are embarrassed to have heard anything.³

Moore's reviews also openly identify Stevens' strategy of employing various disguises and deceptions. In her 1937 review of *Owl's Clover* and *Ideas of Order*, Moore compares Stevens' "hints and disguises" to Mercury's:

His method of hints and disguises should have Mercury as their patron divinity, for in the guise of "a dark rabbi," an ogre, a traveller, a comedian, an old woman, he deceives us as the god misled the aged couple in the myth.⁴

Mercury, who is identified with Hermes from Greek mythology, is known for his cunning.⁵ In Book Eight of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, Baucis and Philemon (Moore's "aged couple in the myth") entertain Jove and his mischievous son Mercury, who have come to earth in disguise in order to test the piety and generosity of those they meet. Many wealthy homes turn them away, but Baucis and Philemon, who are very poor, receive Jove and Mercury with great hospitality. As a result, the Gods reveal their identity, save the couple from a flood, and later, when Baucis and Philemon request to die at the same time, turn them into trees whose boughs intertwine. Moore may also be thinking of Mercury's other disguises in

The Metamorphoses. In Book Two, for example, he lures a shepherd's cattle away; an old servant, Battus, observes this theft. Mercury, who is afraid of being discovered, offers the servant a gift in return for his saying nothing about the theft. Then as a test, Mercury returns in disguise to ask the servant where the cattle are hidden; this time he offers him two gifts—a cow and a bull—and the old man readily tells him where he can find the stolen cattle. Mercury then drops his disguise and reveals his identity; in revenge he transforms the servant into a stone—a black flint. Thus Moore's analogy between Stevens' "method of hints and disguises" and Mercury's artful deceptions and their repercussions is scarcely as playful or as complimentary as it might initially appear.

In her 1936 review of *Ideas of Order*, Moore also addresses Stevens' ability to adopt different postures:

Wallace Stevens can be as serious as the starving-times of the first settlers, and he can be Daumier caricaturing the photographer, making a time exposure watch in hand, above the title, "Patience is an Attribute of the Donkey."⁶

And in 1952 Moore again returns to a consideration of Stevens' "secrets" and "disguises": "Wallace Stevens," she maintains, "embeds his secrets, inventing disguises which assure him freedom to speak out . . ." ⁷ Although Moore identifies the existence of Stevens' secrets and disguises, she does not try to "disclose" his morbid secrets. In fact, she seems more interested in pointing to instances in his work where he "is beyond fathoming."

Moore preserves Stevens' impenetrability, but this preservation can amount to both a masking and an unmasking of his aesthetic. For example, when she notes in her 1924 review of *Harmonium*,

There is a certain bellicose sensitiveness in

"I do not know which to prefer . . .
The blackbird whistling
Or just after,"⁸

Moore both protects Stevens from interpretation and voices her ambivalence about, or at least exposes, the incomprehensibility of these lines. Moore conceals this double enterprise from immediate recognition by using the strategy of imitative appreciation—a strategy that has consistently been associated with praise. The phrase "bellicose sensitiveness" imitates Stevens' indecision about "which to prefer . . ." But imitation is often not far from parody; Moore's oxymoron may be seen as both a tribute to the temperament behind these lines and as a parody of that temperament.

Moore's imitative appreciation is both a tribute to Stevens' enterprise and a parody of it in her 1937 review of *Owl's Clover* and *Ideas of Order* where she defends Stevens for being difficult, for doing that which may contribute to am-

biguity, or vagueness:

We are able here, to see the salutary effect of insisting that a piece of writing please the writer himself before it pleases anyone else; and how a poet may be a wall of incorruptibility against any concessive violating of the essential aura of contributory vagueness.⁹

In an effort to placate the reader who complains about Stevens' manner and wants to alter his technique—to penetrate “the essential aura of vagueness” — Moore parodies the language of a legal document that promises some exchange of information. But Moore's own opacity here—her own impenetrable, “contributory vagueness”—may be more than just a tribute to, and a defense of, Stevens. Her style of approaching his work protects Stevens and disguises her own possible ambivalence from immediate detection.

Moore's imitative appreciation also draws on some of the seventeenth century prose conventions used by such writers as Browne, Donne, and Burton. In 1909, while studying at Bryn Mawr College, Moore took a course in “Imitative Writing.” We know from her notebook for this course that many of the writers she studied were seventeenth century prose writers.¹⁰

Some of the conventions she uses include the exploded period, a device which for Moore often involves a sudden unexpected movement from a simile to an elaborate metaphor. In this moment of explosion, the metaphor often comes into being only to elude us. She also employs antithesis. And both of these conventions frequently entail an elaborate use of quotation. Moore's quotations often alter the pace of her sentences, contributing sometimes to the appearance of an explosion in them.

Moore's use of these conventions exposes us to a mind that reveals and conceals simultaneously, that sets up grammatical expectations only to break them. Her critical mask mirrors Stevens' aesthetic—an aesthetic that for Moore is inextricably tied to “his method of hints and disguises.”

In her homage to Stevens' imagination in her 1924 review of *Harmonium*, Moore creates a strikingly visual baroque conceit for the imagination that rivals Stevens' own tendency to “go contrary ways”:

Imagination implies energy and imagination of the finest type involves an energy which results in order “as the motion of a snake's body goes through all parts at once, and its volition acts at the same instant in coils that go contrary ways.”¹¹

The structure of the sentence mirrors “the motion of the snake's body.” The contrary energy of the sentence imitates the coils of the snake that also “go contrary ways.” In the first part of the sentence we experience a mind tentatively groping after knowledge and defining, with increasing precision, the terms of that knowledge: “Imagination implies energy/ and imagination of the finest type involves an energy/ which results in order . . . ” These divisions suggest that we read the

sentence up to this point in increments; no part of the sentence is subordinate to the whole. After the clause—"which results in order"—we expect closure, or a more prolonged pause, and yet just as Moore creates this resting place, she shifts her energies to what appears to be a simile introduced by "as" but in fact is an elaborate metaphor. Her embedded quotation here breaks the sense of a mind processing information as it goes along. The pace of her meditation shifts and we have the effect of an exploded period; there is a rupture, a sense of surprise, and a shift in grammatical energy as Moore's metaphor unfolds. And like Stevens' aesthetic, the snake's motion embodies both order and mystery—is both accessible and impenetrable.

Moore also both exposes us to Stevens' aesthetic and distances us from it in her 1937 review of *Owl's Clover* and *Ideas of Order* when she pays tribute to Stevens' "bravura":

But best of all, the bravura. Upon the general marine volume of statement is set a parachute-spinnaker of verbiage which looms out like half a cantaloupe and gives the body of the theme the air of a fabled argosy advancing.¹²

The movement of the sentence enacts the meaning of the metaphor. The sentence itself unfolds like "a parachute-spinnaker of verbiage." Upon Stevens' "marine volume of statement" appears a large, triangular, billowy sail of "verbiage" which looms into being, taking the shape and appearance of "half a cantaloupe." Moore's comparison between the parachute-spinnaker and half a cantaloupe is wonderfully apt, for the shape and appearance of the melon with its ribbed rind suggests the shape of the sail. This precise visual detail grounds the metaphor in this world, and yet, as the spinnaker comes into sight and takes shape, it "gives the body of the theme the air of a fabled argosy advancing." This classical image of a legendary fleet of ships has a timeless fixity; it is caught in a moment of stasis. This moment of stasis, however, is belied by the perpetual motion of the modifier "advancing." We expect a complete stop at the end of the sentence, and yet Moore's placement of this adjectival modifier subverts this expectation. As her baroque period explodes, simile is consumed by metaphor. And just as her metaphor comes into view, it passes by: caught in a moment of fixity, yet paradoxically advancing in a continual present. Like Stevens' bravura, Moore's own verbiage here sets up certain expectations only to overturn them.

Moore's use of antithesis is still another way that she both exposes and protects—both unmasks and masks—Stevens' seemingly unapproachable temperament. Functioning as a shield for Stevens and as a fortress for Moore as a critic, antithesis becomes a rhetorical mask for both of them. For example, in the following statement from her July 1925 *Dial* "Comment," we forget that Moore is actually directing our attention to aesthetic consanguinity when she points out that "Wallace Stevens' morosely ecstatic, trembling yet defiant, multifarious plumage of thought and word is to be found, also, in France."¹³ Although the cadence of the two phrases—"morosely ecstatic" and "trembling yet defiant"—

suggests balance and equilibrium, both forms of antithesis imply internal division or contradiction. The oxymoron “morosely ecstatic” evokes a divided self; Stevens is both sullen and gloomy, on the one hand, and full of rapture, on the other. The second form of antithesis—“trembling yet defiant”—also suggests an internal imbalance; Stevens is fearful on the one hand—even subservient—and hostile to authority, on the other. Moore’s use of antithesis here and elsewhere in her criticism is not used merely to mystify our ability to say with any certainty what a given writer’s “thought and word” consist of. For Moore, Stevens’ artistic enterprise, and indeed any artistic endeavor, grows out of and is fueled by such divisions.

Another place that Moore seems to reveal Stevens’ aesthetic only to conceal it occurs in her 1924 review of *Harmonium*:

One feels, however, an achieved remoteness as in Tuh Muh’s lyric criticism: “Powerful is the painting . . . and high is it hung on the spotless wall in the lofty hall of your mansion.”¹⁴

Moore’s “achieved remoteness” mirrors and perhaps even competes with Stevens’. Again we have a simile that becomes displaced by the creation of a metaphor; and again if the simile seems to unmask some quality of Stevens, the metaphor serves to reinstate his inaccessibility. Moore first likens Stevens to Tuh Muh’s lyric criticism; then she implicitly likens his “achieved remoteness” to an inaccessible painting that nevertheless retains its autonomy and well defined place “on the spotless wall in the lofty hall.” Like a Chinese box that opens only to reveal another box, Moore’s masks multiply in deference to Stevens’.

Moore’s multiple masks throughout her criticism of Stevens not only illuminate Stevens’ aesthetic, but also allow her both to champion his work over many decades and to call attention to the ways in which he “is beyond fathoming.” To date no one has noticed the doubleness of Moore’s enterprise; in fact, R. P. Blackmur, who published his first essay on Stevens in 1932 (eight years after Moore reviewed *Harmonium*) is given credit for being the first critic to praise Stevens’ verbal gymnastics, while finding them at times incomprehensible.¹⁵ Although Blackmur’s 1932 “close readings” of individual poems certainly exposed Stevens’ elusiveness, Moore’s method of gingerly encircling Stevens’ aesthetic with her imitative appreciation accomplished this as early as 1924.

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Notes

¹Rosenbach Museum & Library, Typed Letter Carbon, Marianne Moore to T. S. Eliot, June 27, 1935. This and the other letters cited below are previously unpublished material by Marianne Moore. Copyright © 1984 by Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore, and are not to be reprinted without written permission.

²Moore, "There is a War that Never Ends," *Kenyon Review*, 5 (Winter, 1943), 146.

³Rosenbach Museum & Library, Typed Letter Draft, Marianne Moore to William Carlos Williams, 1944.

⁴Moore, "Unanimity and Fortitude," *Poetry*, 49 (February 1937), 270.

⁵On the day of his birth Hermes stole away and invented the lyre by killing a tortoise and using its shell for his instrument. On the same day he stole fifty cows from Apollo; upon being confronted, he made a gift of the lyre to Apollo and thus escaped punishment.

⁶Moore, "Ideas of Order," *The Criterion*, 15 (January 1936), 308.

⁷Moore, "A Bold Virtuoso," in *Predilections* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 43.

⁸Moore, "Well Moused, Lion," *The Dial*, 76 (January 1924), 87.

⁹Moore, "Unanimity and Fortitude," 270.

¹⁰See Rosenbach Museum & Library 1251/27 which includes Moore's notes from her English Course, "Imitative Writing."

¹¹Moore, "Well Moused, Lion," 89.

¹²Moore, "Unanimity and Fortitude," 269.

¹³Moore, "Comment," *The Dial*, 79 (July 1925), 87.

¹⁴Moore, "Well Moused, Lion," 84.

¹⁵Irwin Ehrenpreis, "Introduction," *Wallace Stevens: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ehrenpreis (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), p. 39.

Wallace Stevens: "The Man with the *Blues* Guitar"

ALDEN R. TURNER

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."
—"The Man with the Blue Guitar," I

Writing in Malcolm Cowley's *New Republic*, Theodore Roethke had expressed his dissatisfaction that Wallace Stevens' "rich and special sensibility should be content with the order of words and music, and not project itself more vigorously upon the present-day world."¹ In his infamous *New Masses* review of *Ideas of Order* (1935), Stanley Burnshaw had concluded that neither Stevens nor another poet, Haniel Long, was "weakening the class in power—as yet they are potential allies as well as potential enemies," calling upon them for a "full realization of the alternatives facing them as artists." Although Burnshaw had numbered Stevens among those "acutely conscious members of a class menaced by the clashes between capital and labor . . . in the throes of a struggle for philosophical adjustment," he nonetheless added Stevens' poetry to "a considered record of agitated attitudes toward the present social order."² In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, publisher of *Owl's Clover* (1936), Stevens commented: "The review in *MASSSES* was a most interesting review, because it placed me in a new setting. I hope I am headed left, but there are lefts and lefts, and certainly I am not headed for the ghastly left of *MASSSES*."³ During the 1930's when Stevens was criticized for not writing a poetry of social consciousness, his poetic response in *Owl's Clover*, "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," was intended, he says, to "apply the point of view of a poet to Communism" (*LWS* 289). Dissatisfied by simply claiming that the poet must explore the world in his own way and still unresolved about his artistic relations to the world around him, Stevens faced what he too describes as a "problem of realization," "trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is" (*LWS* 316), when he approached the writing of a major work, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937).

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" reflects Stevens' quarrel with his contemporaries. The blue guitar, as most critics agree, is a figure for the imagination, but confronted with the demand for "A tune upon the blue guitar/ Of things exactly as they are" (I), the guitarist, in "changing" and "missing" these things as they are, does not fulfill his audience's demands for a music, a poetry of "ourselves." Rather, the romantic "serenade/ Of a man that plays a blue guitar" (II) evades reality. The guitarist's "serenade almost to man" becomes a cacophonous, dissonant, intensely expressive sequence of sounds in subsequent stanzas: "To bang it from a savage blue,/ Jangling the metal of the strings" (III); "This buzzing of the blue guitar" (IV); "the chattering of your guitar" (V); "The strings are cold on the blue guitar" (VII); "I know my lazy, leaden twang/ . . . I twang it out and leave it there" (VIII). The transformation is clear: "The blue guitar/ Becomes the place of things as they are,/ A composing of senses of the guitar" (VI). Whereas the romantic serenade involves playing "the chord that falsifies," these sounds express a reality where "the discord merely magnifies" (XI). In this sense, Stevens' blue guitar is a *blues* guitar. Musicologist Wilfred Mellers comments that in blues music, "the monotonous reiteration of the guitar, with chittering telescoped dissonances low in its register, is the reality that goes on and on, unalleviated, against which the voice can do no more than speak, rather than sing, broken disjointed phrases, separated by silences."⁴

The image of the blue guitar as the blues guitar of the American black cultural tradition is a figure for collective dispossession, alienation, and suffering appropriate to Stevens' need to confront the world's oppressive realities—"this 'hoard/ Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves" (XV) — summoned by its association with feeling blue: "The color like a thought that grows/ Out of a mood" (IX). The expressions of alienation, "To stand// Remote and call it merciful" (VII), and suffering, "a petty misery/ At heart, a petty misery" (X), recall Stevens' early awareness that "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90) in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (1915). But the blues do not only express reality; they cope with its potentially destructive forces, as Stevens' guitarist discovers:

I know my lazy, leaden twang
Is like the reason in a storm;

And yet it brings the storm to bear.
I twang it out and leave it there.

(VIII)

Although the blue guitar now plays a music of ourselves, it fails to produce "A tune beyond us" and Stevens' man is confined to "the overcast blue/ Of the air" in his oppressive environment: "The weather of his stage, himself" (IX). Mellers points out that, in blues music, "The rigidity of form was a part of his act of acceptance: a part . . . of the reality from which, without sentimental evasion or even religious hope, he started. This is why, though the blues are intensely personal insofar as each man sings, alone, of his own sorrow, they are also—even

more than most folk-art—impersonal insofar as each man's sorrow is a common lot. Though the blues singer may protest against destiny, he is not usually angry, and seldom looks to heaven for relief. He sings to get the blues off his mind: the mere statement becomes therapeutic, an emotional liberation.⁵⁵

The tension between confinement and liberation, form and freedom, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" suggests classical theme and variations techniques of composition, but the improvisatory quality of Stevens' poetry is more characteristic of the folk performer who does not so much create as give order and meaning to material learned in a particular way and expressed in relation to conventions that attend a specific style or piece. For instance, Gilbert Chase discusses the musical syncretism of West African and European elements in American black spirituals in terms of the "proviso that they were made largely out of pre-existing elements, both as regards to the words and the music. That the factor of invention, as well as of accretion and transformation, entered into the process is not to be denied. But it was probably invention of detail rather than of a whole: some felicitous phrase of contagious tag line thought up and caught up on the spur of the moment and incorporated into the ever-changing content of a traditionally established form."⁵⁶ Similarly, Stevens' guitarist is "A shearsman of sorts" (I) who plays his guitar "squatting like a tailor (a shearsman) as he works on his cloth" (*LWS* 783), stitching together the accessible materials of his world:

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

(II)

In his romantic "serenade almost to man," the guitarist patches together a man and a world from fragments of classical representations rather than penetrating to some remote, inaccessible "man number one" (III). He laments that he can neither express nor assume the role ("to play") of this fictional idea of man in his improvisations confined to the conventional images of man's form available to him. He is "The maker of thing yet to be made," and, being such a figure, he wears "the tragic robe// Of the actor" (IX).

This image of man as a performer, a player, regaled in his inherited "robes and symbols" (XXV) accumulated during his "evolution," endures throughout Stevens' creations and deceptions, improvisations and repetitions, until the poet announces in stanza thirty: "From this I shall evolve a man" (XXX). Stevens explains: "Man, when regarded for a sufficient length of time, as an object of study assumes the appearance of property, as that word is used in the theatre or in a studio. He becomes, in short, one of the fantoccini of meditation or, as I have

called him, 'the old fantoche' " (LWS 791). Stevens' "old fantoche" is "Man without variation. Man in C Major. The complete realization of the idea of man. Man at his happier normal." The word, *fantoccini*, means little puppets, and it is necessary to consider who manipulates their strings. The image recalls the guitarist who plucks the steel strings of his instrument to produce a music of ourselves when confronted by his audience's demands for reality. These strings of the guitar connote the "heavy cables, slung// Through Oxidia, banal suburb" (XXX). But the man as puppet also stares at "the cross-piece on a pole," the contraption by which the puppeteer operates his marionette. The man whom Stevens evolves is *both* puppeteer and puppet, guitarist and instrument. The creation of this image of man confined to the Christian symbol of the cross involves, however, a corresponding decreation of this symbol in his confrontation with the modern world, so that the "cross-piece on a pole" is neither more nor less than a telephone pole. The liberating effect of this realism establishes the man as "suddenly and at last, actually and presently, to be an employee of the Oxidia Electric Light and Power Company" (LWS 791). In other words, "Oxidia is Olympia" (XXX) and, as Stevens comments, "if I am to 'evolve a man' in Oxidia and if Oxidia is the only possible Olympia, in any real sense, then Oxidia is that from which Olympia must come" (LWS 788-89).

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens presents "a wrangling of two dreams" (XXXIII), a struggle we might approach in any number of ways, but none is more crucial than the confrontation of Stevens' man with the "pagan in a varnished car" (X)—the false hero of the modern world:

—behold

The approach of him whom none believes,

Whom all believe that all believe,
A pagan in a varnished car.

Roll a drum upon the blue guitar.
Lean from the steeple. Cry aloud,

"Here am I, my adversary, that
Confront you, hoo-ing the slick trombones,

Yet with a petty misery
At heart, a petty misery,

Ever the prelude to your end,
The touch that topples men and rock."

(X)

The guitarist's petty misery, expressed here in the urban blues of jazz music ("hoo-ing the slick trombones"), announces his dominion as a credible Ameri-

can folk hero who changes Louis' imperial "*l'état, c'est moi*" to his own "Tom-tom, c'est moi" (XII). This man whose anguish is expressed in his confrontation with the world of the false hero, the realm of "A pagan in a varnished car," is Stevens' image of man as the blues musician. The tragedy of this man's confrontation with the world as "Oxidia, banal suburb" is the continuity of human suffering, the "intimacies of profound faith" (LWS 789), which gives order and meaning to his interior life. Stevens' gloss on this stanza reads:

If we are to think of a supreme fiction, instead of creating it, as the Greeks did, for example, in the form of a mythology, we might choose to create it in the image of man: an agreed-on superman. He would not be the typical hero taking part in parades, (columns red with red-fire, bells tolling, tin cans, confetti) in whom actually no one believes as a truly great man, but in whom everybody pretends to believe, someone completely outside of the intimacies of profound faith, a politician, a soldier, Harry Truman as god. *This second-rate creature is the adversary*. I address him but with hostility hoo-ing the slick trombones. I deride & challenge him and the words hoo-ing the slick trombones express the derision & challenge. . . . the words that follow:

Yet with a petty misery
At heart, a petty misery

mean that the cheap glory of the false hero, not a true man of the imagination, made me sick at heart. It is just that petty misery, repeated in the hearts of other men, that topples the worthless. I may have cried out Here am I and yet have stood by, unheard, hooing the slick trombones, without worrying about my English (LWS 789).

Stevens' own faith in this continuity of a petty misery is presented as the prelude to the end of false heroes and the edifice of belief in technology as the source of human salvation. Stevens maintains that the meaning of "That generation's dream, aviled/ In the mud, in Monday's dirty light" (XXXIII) of Oxidia may yet be found in a life and a world whose relations are *ours* in reality without any meaning or value beyond those we choose:

Here is the bread of time to come,

Here is its actual stone. The bread
Will be our bread, the stone will be

Our bed and we shall sleep by night.
We shall forget by day, except

The moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined jay.

(XXXIII)

Stevens' image of the blue guitar is finally decreed into the natural forms of the wooden pine tree and the blue jay, which figuratively suggest the origins of the instrument's construction. This liberation of the guitar from its artifice of order (sound, color, shape) not so ironically sustains its reality as an *icon*—a verbal sign designating the American black people's "blues"—that expresses and copes with "Oxidial, banal suburb" in this modern variation on the thematic symbolism of the cross.

Wallace Stevens unequivocally confronts the tragedy of our confinement to and liberation from a continuity of belief in images of human suffering. Stevens' prose expresses the great issue at the edge of this dilemma: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (*OP* 163). Stevens' poetry explores the human possibilities for the end of belief in our time: "Nothing must stand/ Between you and the shapes you take/ When the crust of shape has been destroyed" (XXXII).

The University of Manitoba

Notes

¹Theodore Roethke, rev. of *Ideas of Order*, by Wallace Stevens, *The New Republic*, 15 July 1936, p. 305.

²Stanley Burnshaw, "Turmoil in the Middle Ground," *The New Masses*, 1 October 1935, pp. 41-42.

³Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 286. All subsequent references to this volume are abbreviated *LWS* in the text. Other volumes of Stevens' work cited are abbreviated as follows: *CP*: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *OP*: *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957).

⁴Wilfred Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964), p. 268.

⁵Mellers, p. 267.

⁶Gilbert Chase, *America's Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), p. 242.

⁷Cited in A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 250, from Stevens' statement in *Mattino Domenicale Ed Altre Poesie*, trans. Renato Poggioli (Turin, 1954), p. 174.

Poems

"Two Egyptians Being Served by a Nazi"

And then he [Wallace Stevens] said,
"Gee that's a good title for a poem . . ."

—Wilson Taylor quoted by Peter Brazeau

If you can address clouds in a certain manner,
Hold an academic discourse in Havana,
Permit macabre mice to dance,
Find lions in Sweden
Or mountains covered with cats;

If you can start a paltry nude on a spring voyage,
Send a postcard from a volcano,
Put a pineapple together again
And still look in thirteen ways at a blackbird;

If you agree that reality is an activity of the most august im-
agination;

And to top it all,
If you can spell, let along say (quickly)
Lebensweisheitspielerei

Why, oh why
Did you not let a Nazi serve two Egyptians?

You're right:
"It was a rabbi's question.
Let the rabbis reply."

Carl Djerassi
Department of Chemistry
Stanford University

The Descent

"A poem is the cry of its occasion,"
Wallace Stevens wrote. What is the moment

Now to realize? Collapse the nightmare
Of more for worse? What is too much

Death about or is it just enough
To keep the golden lights flashing on

The marquee? Whoever enjoys the death
Of others the most is elected president.

On television male and female attempt
While kissing to consume each other.

Sex, violence, crime and greed are
Prime Time in the offices of our tomorrows.

Is the drummer Cliff Leeman alive?
Will anyone play *Begin the Bequine* again?

Does *Star Dust* give way to war in space?
To whom is American destiny manifest?

Norman Macleod
Greenville, NC

A High-Toned Old Christian Gentleman

One detail from the shadowy scene
tells us his posture: his naked toes
are pointing straight up, the soles of his feet
press against nothing more solid than air.
He has for the moment lost his foothold
on the earth where all that happens is real.

And yet he does not go climbing up
the air to heights where grave events
would release his body's weight to all
he could imagine. He is simply
sleeping. His toes twitch with dreams
not in the world but of the world.

Quandary

When you push the emptied dishwasher
back from the sink to its resting place,
its wheels don't squeal as usual. And through
the open window comes a cool
breeze, a parting, patronizing
caress from the torrid afternoon.
Yet your day does not close whole. You recall

how quarks of all colors, all nuclear spins
and forces combine to query, as if
they are quibbles, the very questions you strain
to raise at your utmost stretch of mind.
Should you, then, look for unexamined
quirks in your bundles of nerves, or for
unexpected wobbles in the light from stars?

Ernest Sandeen
University of Notre Dame

Reviews

The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams. By David Walker. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

The claims of David Walker's compact and mannerly book are more limited than his title perhaps suggests, though less limited than he himself sometimes makes them sound. He proposes to identify and describe in the work of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams a type of poem distinguished by the utter absence of a dramatized speaker and the consequent necessity of direct participation by the reader in the imaginative act of vision the poem represents. With the sense of the speaker refined out of the poem, it becomes "transparent," and the reader enacts the meaning of the poem in the direct experience of a "world" governed by rhetoric—less reading *and* meaning than reading *as* meaning. But Walker's aim is not merely taxonomic. In the broadest historical terms, he sees the transparent lyric as a type of poem that points a direction away from essentially expressive Romantic and Symbolist poetics. Recognizing the type and its fundamental difference from poetry in which an implied speaker serves as the center that determines meaning can provide criticism with better tools for dealing with the work of some "post-modern" poets (though John Ashbery is Walker's only example). In the narrower terms of the currently conventional views of Stevens and Williams themselves, Walker sets out to show that the commonplace distinction between the cerebral "poet of the act of the mind" and the Objectivist champion of "no ideas but in things" may be a false distinction. The transparent lyric unites idealist and empiricist: no ideas can arise except from the reader's encounter with the poem as a thing, and in forcing the reader's participation the poem not only represents an act of the mind, it elicits one as well.

Walker approaches his task with a clear sense of purpose and of pace. Though he says that he has "chosen to organize the book as a series of essays on related topics rather than as a single evolving argument" (p. xv), few single evolving arguments are so methodical and easy to follow. The preface sets up the argument step by step, chapter by chapter. The first chapter begins with a brief consideration of the Romantic dramatic lyric and moves forward toward a definition of the transparent lyric, with several examples from Stevens' poems and one from Williams'. Two of Walker's three chapters on Stevens are organized topically—one emphasizing the importance of performance and reading through Stevens' recurrent metaphors of theater and book, and one arguing the centrality of metaphorical thinking in Stevens' poetry in general and in the transparent lyric in particular. The third Stevens chapter concerns the transparent lyric in the late poems. For the two Williams chapters, Walker chooses a simpler scheme, treating first the poet's practice with the transparent lyric before *Paterson* and then his practice after *Paterson*. Because he gives four chapters to Stevens' poetry—three entirely, one mostly—including the chapters which lay out most of the theoretical ground, Walker's book does seem a bit unbalanced, but this is not a serious problem. The book's "Postscript" acknowledges Charles Altieri's *Act and Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding* and Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* as especially helpful aids in ratifying Walker's assumptions and stimulating his thought about the transparent lyric.

One of the book's limitations Walker acknowledges from the outset: his is not a comprehensive study of these two prolific poets, nor was it meant to be. The transparent lyric is hardly their only stock in trade, though its development is especially significant to the poetics of both, and this particular form may not be the best guide to some of their major themes. Given this limitation, Walker might well have included a much larger scale ex-

amination of the further development of the transparent lyric in the work of poets of the generations since that of Stevens and Williams. Perhaps we can look forward to such an application in some future book. Yet one cannot help but feel that this book—with the definition established and the techniques of analysis demonstrated through close attention to many Stevens and Williams poems—was the place to make a more substantial beginning. Perhaps because of the limited focus of his study, Walker does take great care in placing his inquiry in the context of other critics' comprehensive studies of the two poets. He uses the comments of Riddel, Bloom, and others on Stevens and those of Whitaker and Breslin on Williams primarily to challenge the assumptions of Romanticism, inherent or explicit, in their views. He can then go on to show that critical approaches that depend on a dramatized speaker cannot adequately describe poems like Stevens' "The Snow Man," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," even "The Idea of Order at Key West," or Williams' "The Sea," "Shadows," or "Sonnet in Search of an Author." The contrast between Walker's method and the variety of "traditional" methods is certainly valuable, but by placing a review of previous criticism predictably at the beginning of virtually every chapter, Walker allows his careful procedure to become somewhat monotonous and repetitive.

If Walker's painstaking method and limited focus do lead to these weaknesses, they are equally the source of the book's strengths. Walker develops his argument always through attention to the rhetoric and verbal texture of the poems, and that means through close reading of individual works. His book embodies, as a result, an argument tending in its implications toward contemporary theoretical criticism but conducted by relatively traditional New Critical techniques. It is refreshing indeed to see someone bravely tackle a question of genre "armed," as Walker says himself, "with no more theoretical ammunition than what I hoped were imagination and common sense" (p. ix), and doubly refreshing to have those tools accomplish so much when sensitively employed. I would single out as especially effective the discussions of Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Landscape with Boat," and "Metaphor as Degeneration" and of Williams' "The Sea-Elephant."

The effects of rhetoric generally push his discussion toward a Deconstructionist frustration of determined meaning. Toward it, but not all the way to it, Walker insists: meaning remains relatively though not fully determined. The emphasis on rhetoric begins very early in the book, as Walker argues that the "rhetorical stance" of the Romantic meditative lyric, with its dramatized speaker recounting an experience "already achieved . . . [,] effectively prevents that ideal merger of self and nature, of mind and object, that Coleridge compellingly described" (p. 8). The transparent lyric, which does find a way to accomplish that merger, is an essentially rhetorical invention: "The transparent lyric may be defined as a poem whose rhetoric establishes its own incompleteness; it is presented not as a completed discourse but as a structure that invites the reader to project himself or herself into its world . . ." (p. 18). The transparent lyric is not a fully determined expression of an experience already achieved, but a partly determined mimesis of an experience in process. The reader's self-projection makes "the act of reading . . . analogous to the sympathetic imaginative union with the phenomenal world that the Romantics persistently sought" (p. 18). But in Stevens' and Williams' modern poems, that union achieved in reading is highly unstable: "By focusing dramatically on the process of vision, they force us to recognize that imaginative coherence is local and subjective . . . [W]hile often moving toward moments of harmony between man and nature, [transparent lyrics] remind us simultaneously that the 'self' and 'world' of which that harmony is composed are fictive and transitory. Deeply mimetic of the shifting, ephemeral nature of all experience, they never allow us to rest secure in any fixed, comfortable pattern of seeing or thinking" (p. 23). A reader can, however, rest secure in Walker's pattern of seeing and thinking, as his

excellent examinations of individual poems prove that the dialectical tension between reader and text-as-world yields meanings that may be unstable but not unintelligible.

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Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire.

By Helen Vendler. The Hodges Lectures. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

Helen Vendler's new book, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*, is a brief but very readable collection of the four essays she delivered as part of the John C. Hodges Lecture Series at The University of Tennessee. In these essays she argues for what she calls Stevens' "great subject": "Desire, its illusions and its despairs" or, put another way, "the human illusions engendered by desire are his great subject." Vendler reads against the grain of most critical approaches to Stevens, finding his work to spring from "passionate feeling, and not merely epistemological query." She categorizes these "general emotional experiences common to us all" into three main divisions—"catastrophic disappointment, bitter solitude, or personal sadness"—and asserts that such human emotional experiences constitute the "fundamental *donnée*" of Stevens' poetry. In order to disclose the subtleties and implications of this central subject, she directs her attention to the short poems the longer studies of Stevens have generally overlooked, works like the late "Local Objects" and "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" from *Opus Posthumous*, or "The Dove in the Belly" and "Somnambulisma" from *Transport to Summer*. In addition to discussions of these lesser known works, she also provides intriguing readings of such staples of Stevens criticism as "The Emperor of Ice Cream," "The Motive for Metaphor," and "A Primitive Like an Orb," from which the book's subtitle is derived. In her typically uncluttered and personable style Vendler traces in these and many other short poems Stevens' "metamorphoses of plenary desire into wasted despair and its rearousal into affluent desire again—that recurrent and unbiddable cycle" Stevens elsewhere calls desire's "ancient cycle." The value of this analysis of desire lies in the precision of Vendler's focus, not upon the artifacts and objects of desire, but upon the never-ending process itself, the cycle of creation/ decreation that is the characteristic energy of Stevens' poetry. For Vendler, Stevens' poems are dynamic fields of conflicting forces in which we witness "the perpetual vanishing before us of objects of desire and the reformulating energy of the ever-desiring self." In discussing the "father" who leaps through "The Auroras of Autumn," she notes that "our desire stays alive only by obliterating former objects of desire," and it is the recreative force disclosed by this obliteration—the force of a never-to-be-satisfied desire—that Vendler takes as her subject. In its focus upon the complicated and conflictual energy of Stevens' poetry, *Words Chosen Out of Desire* is a valuable contribution to Stevens criticism.

And yet (there's always an "and yet" in any discussion of Stevens), haven't we, in a way, heard all this before? Indeed, Vendler's approach, which, as she says, tethers Stevens' poems to a central and common "human feeling" and views his poems as the sites of the "projections of [this] desire," suggests a complementary intention that accompanies the book's disclosures of the dynamics of desire. That intention seems to be the re-Romanticization of Stevens' work through the appeal to an idealized, imaginatively creative self. She envisions her project as a salvation of Stevens' poetry and a "correction" of the "misunderstandings" that, she feels, characterize Stevens criticism: "When I see Stevens misunderstood, as I believe he often is, I feel some obligation, in consequence, to present an alternative view . . . to present the Stevens I know to the public eye." Vendler wants

to set the record straight as far as Stevens is concerned (do we hear in this project the ephebe's desire to one day "get it straight . . . at the Sorbonne?") by, as she says, "simplifying the poems" in a manner that, she hopes, does not "falsify them": to read them, that is, as the projections of a natural human feeling and as the manifestations of a simple, passionate "self" that is not itself an idealization subject to the conflictual energy the poems disclose. It is not surprising, then, that Vendler often views Stevens from the point of view of his connections with his Romantic precursors. From Vendler's perspective, Stevens' poetry, like Wordsworth's, suggests that "feeling . . . is the organizing principle of poetry"; it shows that Stevens "learned from Shelley and Coleridge the connection of the loss of religious faith with the loss of sexual faith"; and it "corrects" Keats by refusing to "numb our senses to the zero degree of the snow man." Her simplification of Stevens relies upon a Romantic idealization of the "self" whose passionate feelings are imaginatively projected into the poem. That creative "self" is, for Vendler, the "solar energy that makes all things come into being," for "it must be remembered that before the poem put the local objects on paper, the page was blank." This idealized self always starts anew with a clean page, at the "ground zero of desire."

To what critical "misunderstandings," then, does Vendler offer her book as a "correction"? Although she never explicitly refers to other critical approaches (except to suggest that, by not tying Stevens' poems to a center of "human feeling," such approaches locate those poems in a "world of ghosts" and spectral "epistemological questions"), her adversary would seem to be those critical discourses that complicate the idealized "self" and the idea of poetry as the projection of that self: for example, the deconstructive or phenomenological critical approaches that have most recently appropriated Stevens to their own camps. Her re-Romanticizing of Stevens in *Words Chosen Out of Desire* is an attempt to rescue his poetry from those complicating discourses, to provide a "correction" of their "misunderstandings," in the name of the central "self" who projects his desire onto the blank page. This is the first idea of Vendler's book (Stevens' poetry as the projection of a feeling and inventing mind), an insight stubbornly resistant to the complications posed to such a Romantic "first idea" by, for example, the first section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." In the simple clarity and eloquence of its "corrections," however, *Words Chosen Out of Desire* almost makes us forget these muddy complications.

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