

*The  
Wallace  
Stevens  
Journal*



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Volume IX Number 2

Fall 1985

# The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Cover by Kathy Jacobi—*Samuel French Morse*

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## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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This issue is dedicated  
to the memory of  
Samuel French Morse  
1916-1985  
Dean of Stevens scholars

## Samuel French Morse: A Letter and Three Poems

In 1954 Samuel French Morse, then a Hartford professor, published the first extensive bibliography, *Wallace Stevens: A Preliminary Checklist*. As he was finishing it, Morse queried Stevens on various matters, including Stevens' piece on Dufy's lithographs *La Fée Électrique*, *Raoul Dufy: A Note by Wallace Stevens* (New York: Pierre Berès, Inc., 1953). Among other things, the following unpublished letter gives some background on this neglected but rewarding late-Stevens pamphlet. Morse's inquiry concerning the item in the *Yale Lit* refers to Stevens' response to a question regarding the major problem facing young American writers, which was published in the Spring 1946 issue of *The Yale Literary Magazine*.

\* \* \*

July 13, 1954

Mr. Samuel French Morse  
Box 196  
Trinity College  
Hartford 6, Conn.

Dear Mr. Morse:

I have found a signed copy of *Three Academic Pieces*, also a copy of the *Harvard Advocate Anthology*, and a copy of *Inventario* in which *The Rock* first appeared, and I shall hand these to you when we meet on Thursday.

About the work to which the note on Dufy applies, write to Lucien C. Goldschmidt at 33 East 75th Street, New York 21. He used to be the American representative of Pierre Bérès, a bookseller in Paris. He undertook to handle the sale of the Dufy work over here for which he spoke of asking \$400.00 a copy. Then he and Bérès parted and Goldschmidt opened a shop of his own on East 75th Street. In Paris, the sale of the Dufy work has been promoted principally by Louis Carré who used to have a gallery in New York and who is extremely active in Paris. I do not know what the relations between Bérès and Carré may be. Anyhow, Goldschmidt will be able to tell you whether he knows of anyone over here who has a copy of the Dufy work. Goldschmidt came up to Hartford and covered the floor of my office one time with specimen pages. All put together, the thing would make quite a portfolio.

I have not been able to find a copy of *Kora in Hell*. I picked this up with another one of Williams' books some time ago and put them somewhere but was unable to find them yesterday and, since I made rather a thorough search, the thing must be regarded as lost for the time being.

In the *Collected Poems* the only things that I am omitting are all of *Owl's Clover*, pp 39-72 inc. in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and two poems in *Parts of A World: Life on a Battleship* and *The Woman that had More Babies Than That*, pp 59-69 inc. You will find attached a list of the new poems to be included in the *Collected Poems*. The list of the names of magazines has nothing to do with anything in which you are interested. I used this list to indicate to Mr. Knopf instances in which I had procured assignments of copyright.

I know nothing about the item in the *Yale Lit* and have no recollection of ever having seen it.

I forgot to say above about Three Academic Pieces that I have another copy of this in a slip case. Whether all of the signed copies were issued in slip cases (cardboard) I don't know. It could be, but few of them were sent to me that way. I have a recollection that I sent one of these to Mr. Gallup some time ago. The two copies that I have are the only two that I know of.

Sincerely yours,

Wallace Stevens

An Old Man Asleep	The Nation
The Irish Cliffs of Moher	" "
The Plain Sense of Things	" "
One of the Inhabitants of the West	" "
Lebensweisheitspielerei	" "
The Hermitage at the Center	" "
The Green Plant	" "
Madame La Fleurie	Accent
To an Old Philosopher in Rome	Hudson Review
Vacancy in the Park	" "
The Poem that took the Place of a Mountain	" "
Two Illustrations that the World is what you make of it	" "
Prologues to what is Possible	" "
Looking across the Fields	" "
Song of Fixed Accord	" "
The World as Meditation	" "
Long and Sluggish Lines	Origin
A Quiet Normal Life	Voices
Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour	Hudson Review
The Rock	Inventario
St. Armorer's Church from the Outside	Poetry

Note on Moonlight  
The Planet on the Table  
The River of Rivers in Connecticut  
Not Ideas about the Thing

Shenandoah  
Accent  
Inventario  
Trinity Magazine

Quoted with permission from Holly Stevens. ©Holly Stevens

\* \* \*

Samuel French Morse was a poet, as well as a distinguished scholar and teacher. Wallace Stevens' remark in his preface to Morse's first book, *Time of Year*, remained true throughout Morse's career. "He is a realist; he tries to get at New England experience, at New England past and present, at New England foxes and snow and thunderheads . . . his synthesis is essentially a New England synthesis. He writes about his own people and his own objects as closely as possible according to his own perception. This recititude characterizes everything that he does."

The author of four books of verse, Samuel French Morse was at work on a volume of his selected poems, "A Handful of Beach Glass," at the time of his death. The following three poems were the last he composed.

\* \* \*

### Bill's Ice Floe

The hundred-acre ice floe blowing down  
the bay this afternoon looked small compared  
to all the water it was floating on  
unlike the outer isles. The gulls that shared  
the ice seemed half asleep; but off our shore  
the divers, grebes and old squaws and the loons,  
were on the move, like others we were more  
unsure of. Now it's dark: and in the moon's  
long ribbons we make out the risen tide  
there at the Porcupines, and hear the floe  
begin to break apart. Out where the wide  
deep swells pour through the channel, it seems no  
more alien than before an August storm  
when all the white-edged clouds begin to form.

## South Addison

You say it looks as if  
the wind blows mostly east:  
green water, surf, and cloud  
day after day. At least

neither the local nor  
that artist from away  
has ever thought to paint  
the islands down the bay

just as they look from here  
in this fair morning light,  
though sometimes they brush in  
against the blue, the white

quick strokes intended to  
include all four, though not  
their shapes: Big Nash, The Ladle,  
Little Nash, The Pot.

## Garden Party

When Bill got back from fishing, after dusk,  
he always brought the junk: the cunners, hake,  
the dogfish and the puffers, even cusk—  
whatever could be spared, sometimes, to make  
a chowder for the skunks. Bill cleaned and dressed  
the fish and set the water on to heat.  
With skill a cook is born to and a zest  
no one could miss, Helen stirred up a treat  
whose savor twice enriched the piny air.  
Then Bill set out the pans. A whisper stirred  
the grasses and the phlox. The skunks were there,  
more delicate at chowder than a bird  
at bath. And after, through the silver light,  
they danced off as they'd come, into the night.

Quoted with permission from Jane Morse. ©Jane Morse

# Wallace Stevens' Sky That Thinks

DOROTHY EMERSON

## I

When Wallace Stevens asserts that poetry "is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality" (NA 130),<sup>1</sup> he uses a figure of speech that, with its variations, is embedded in language and formulates meanings. Transcendent as "being above the material" and "being beyond" is a version of our notion that thought is higher than matter, a subliminally accepted fiction. Stevens uses this concept in many images to form a symbolic world. That world becomes a duality, with an air-half above an earth-half, where in sky there is a place for reason and imagination, and on earth there is a place for unthinking substance. This duality forms a fictive space for the motions of Stevens' images and symbols and thus makes possible a disclosure of his ideas by indirection.

As Stevens set in motion figures reflected from visible, substantial nature, its trees, sky, moon, clouds, sun, mountains, he transposed them into an analogical nature that is transcendent in the sense that it lies above the real. To say so, however, is merely to speak in a metaphor that signifies that natural phenomena have been "elevated" by conceptualization into the world of thought. These figures, becoming the symbols and tropes of a poetic language, relate to each other concordant with that of images perceived as forming the natural world. Their engagement with each other is a metaphorical enactment of the human process: of man thinking.

A complex of symbols composes this icon; and certain of its fictional correspondences between natural and metaphysical images have been introduced into the Stevens critical literature: for example, the sun as reality in idea and the moon as the imagination. However, they are not shown in their sphere of action, but rather pointed to as an agreed upon equation. To see these analogical fictions in their drama of action is to realize Stevens' mode of illuminating man's metaphysical situation.

The nexus for this action is a master trope that has not been defined by the criticism: the sky as mind. This trope affords a realm for related symbols as they take their course through a metaphysical that, like its counterpart in the physical, is a realm of temporality. Recognition of the sky as mind establishes the fact that even in the early poetry, years before he used the phrase "act of the mind," Stevens sought to depict "processes and results of imagination" as described in Coleridge's assertion in *Biographia Literaria*: "The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination."<sup>2</sup>

As Stevens' dispersed symbols are gathered into a loose association, they are seen as remarkably faithful, each to its own history, and each to its congeniality

with other images within their concourse of meaning. They create an analogical fiction of an internal world overarched by the trope defined and shown at work in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" as the "sky that thinks" (CP 177). This trope, when adequately realized, induces a new reading of many poems and yields an understanding that some whole stanzas are symbolic replications of the mind in action.

When Stevens says that "There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel" (NA 118), he indicates that imagination's world with its figures drawn from nature, and nature's world of mindless forms, as in the case of all parallels, can never meet. However, he suggests that poets, being men, can bring about an interaction, for men live their lives in both the unreal and the real, and the "strange rhetoric" of poets creates other realities open to discovery in a realization of images, symbols and analogies, based on the natural world, as bearers of meaning in the metaphysical.

These other realities begin in perception and conception, unrealities that have their very existence in the living head of man. Where he is, there may be a "glassy ocean lying at the door," either in memory or in his presence as he stands at the door and by realization brings the ocean into the unreal. If he is in a room, there may be, in the sphere of his skull, "a mirror, a lake of reflections," or "a great town hanging pendent in a shade." Man lives in an

Inescapable romance, inescapable choice  
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,  
Reality as a thing seen by the mind . . .

Thus, Stevens considers that perhaps reality is truly

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,  
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,  
A glassy ocean lying at the door,

A great town hanging pendent in a shade,  
An enormous nation happy in a style,  
Everything as unreal as real can be,

In the inexquisite eye.

(CP 468)

At this point in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens asserts his faith that our common substantial world is there and always remains reality: "Who has divided the world, what entrepreneur? / No man" (CP 468). It is man, "a self," that is divided between the real and the unreal.

Man became divided into a two-fold nature, always an earthen creature, and yet an airy self living in concepts during the day and in dreams at night. As sym-

bol for the double self of man, Stevens, in this poem, uses the image of a tree rooted in earth as man is, its branches reaching toward the sky, as man, in his conceptualizations, branches and searches the sky of his mind.

The self, the chrysalis of all men

Became divided in the leisure of blue day  
And more, in branchings after day. One part  
Held fast tenaciously in common earth

And one from central earth to central sky  
And in moonlit extensions of them in the mind  
Searched out such majesty as it could find.

(CP 468-69)

In these lines, Helen Vendler finds "a peculiarly biological metaphor." She conceives the tree image as the human nervous system and the inquisitive eye as the real eye scanning the night sky: "When the eye finds that nocturnal majesty, it reproduces it as well as it can, as the iris of the eye joins with the iridescences in nature."<sup>3</sup>

However, the imagery of the lines is based on that of the sky as mind, and read with Stevens' master trope in mind the reader is inclined toward the view of Harold Bloom who sees the poem's emphasis on the inescapable irony of the human experience: "the supposedly plain version of the eye turns out to be a wholly visionary or Transcendental circle."<sup>4</sup> Stevens uses the word "transcendence" when he asserts of men who live in an "imageless world," for whom "reality is enough," that they "may come and speak, with intense choosing, words that we remember and make our own. Their words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence" (NA 129-130). Thus for Stevens, mankind, experiencing through perception and conception what it trusts to be reality, makes, of what it can apprehend, "an inescapable choice of dreams," a world transcendent to nature and created by language.

## II

The sky and other phenomena of the natural world may be called up into the poetry as perceived parts of our human environment, for Stevens was not always writing in figurative terms. But sky, moon, clouds, seas, sun, trees, lakes also take their place as symbols and tropes in an abstract world manifested as vistas of "the light-bound space of the mind" (CP 436). An early example of occurrence in that space is given in the trope of the sky as mind in "The Cuban Doctor." When the Cuban doctor fled to Egypt to escape the Indian,

. . . the Indian struck  
Out of his cloud and from his sky.

(CP 64)

Thus Stevens in a metaphoric portrayal makes use of the familiar simile, "it struck me like lightning," that describes the experience of one who has come to a sudden knowledge. The sky-mind fiction charges each image of this poem with its relevancy. The Doctor, trying to avoid the thought of death, fled to Egypt's foreign sky, a change of thought. The Indian, one of Stevens' mystic agents of intuition, is in his sky and strikes from a cloud. which is relevant to sky as thought is to mind. The Doctor denies that the lightning was merely a dangling worm or dream of death created by the sky's moon of the imagination. On the edge of sleep, he was stricken by a sudden enlightenment.

The association of cloud with thought is familiar in the cliché, "cloudy thoughts." That image is chosen to begin with here because of its agreeableness to the image of sky as mind. Stevens uses the expression in all its plainness in "Botanist on Alp (No.1)," where he testifies that he lives by the natural world:

For myself, I live by leaves,  
So that corridors of clouds,  
Corridors of cloudy thoughts,  
Seem pretty much one:  
I don't know what.

(CP 134)

If corridors of cloudy thoughts seem pretty much one with corridors of clouds, then the mind as a passageway for drifts of cloudy thoughts takes on a likeness to the sky with its processions of clouds. This is an incipient image in "The Cuban Doctor" with its cloud. It appears as a well-developed trope in "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," another poem from *Harmonium*.

This poem, neglected by almost all Stevens' critics, is considered at length by A. Walton Litz. He says of the clouds: "The resemblance between their 'mortal rendezvous' and our own is the stuff of poetry's cloudy language." He adds that the "poms" of language humanize the heavens, "giving voice to what would otherwise be 'the mute bare splendors of the sun and moon.'"<sup>5</sup> His intelligent reading needs the concept of the master image of sky as mind and its related figure of cloud as thought to realize the originality of the poem and its greater dimensions.

The opening line addresses clouds as "Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns." Here at once is the interpenetration of clouds and thoughts, for accompanying the visual image of clouds, dark but costumed in gold by the sun's rays, is the companion notion that they are wise in the proper use of language. The word "gloomy" doubly suggests that these are westward clouds already invested with the sombre shade of oncoming night and that their thought is foreboding.

The clouds-thoughts analogy is strongly supported by the affirmation that the clouds elicit the same speech as that which is evoked by the mediations of doleful abstract thinkers:

Funest philosophers and ponderers,  
Their evocations are the speech of clouds.

(CP 55)

This utterance is described as

the still sustaining pomps  
Of speech which are like music so profound  
They seem an exaltation without sound.

(CP 55)

This is suggestive of language becoming poetry. One of Stevens' *Adagia* offers a prose version of the theory that feeling (music) and insight (thought) inspire our language: "The feeling or the insight is that which quickens the words, not the other way round" (OP 172). The words, "funest" and "pomp" have implications of the funereal, the ceremonial, the majestic.

Tinged by a sense of mortality, the gloomy meditations and language of the philosophers and ponderers are to be visualized as having origin and place in the mind's open sky, manifesting themselves as a continuity of cloud-thoughts passing over in the waste of time's eternal repetitions.

So speech of your processions returns  
In the casual evocations of your tread  
Across the stale, mysterious seasons.

(CP 56)

As they cross the span of sky or mind to their demise, these clouds-thoughts are advised that if they are to be attended by more than wordless phenomena—the perceived glory of sun or moon—they must enhance "the still sustaining pomps of speech."

Beneath its mien of playful hyperbole, the poem holds its serious theme: that man, alone in the universe with his reveries of oncoming death, has for companionship only his own sublimized language on the theme of mortality. On this he must depend. A praise of poetry, this poem, ostensibly addressed to clouds, is really addressed, in the syndrome of thoughts as clouds, to man, whose thoughts, in cloud-like making and unmaking, rendezvous with him on his mortal journey through the transient phenomena of nature.

### III

Quasi-philosophical and quasi-psychological meanings are to be realized upon a reading of Stevens' figurations as they take their course through the minimal episodes that are a characteristic of the poems. Thus there is an atmosphere of allegory in the poetry as a whole. However, the elements of meanings are fragmented through the various poems and resist efforts to structure them into true

allegory. Of allegory, Stevens wrote: "there is a third reader, one for whom the story and the other meaning should come together like two aspects that combine to produce a third or, if they do not combine, inter-act, so that one influences the other and produces an effect similar in kind to the prismatic formations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions." He desires the effect of analogy in allegory to be as he found it in *La Fontaine*. "Our attention is on the symbol, which is interesting in itself. The other meaning does not dog the symbol like its shadow." He praises the doubleness of the analogy between meaning and symbol when it is "like a play of thought, some trophy that we ourselves gather, some meaning that we ourselves supply" (*NA* 109). An understanding of the symbol is a primary need for the understanding of the language of Stevens' poetry. "Our attention is on the symbol." Meaning is embedded in the figurations which construct a "mythology" that is in a sense simply a point of view, skeptical as to our knowledge of reality, noble in its search for a realization of what man is.

An early poem, "Blanche McCarthy," suggests that man may possibly be delivered from ignorance of his own being through an insightful reading of symbols that emerge unbidden from the self. The analogical fiction of sky as mind underlies its imperatives: "Look in the terrible mirror of the sky." A real mirror is derogated as reflecting "Only the surface—the bending arm. / The leaning shoulder and the searching eye." The instructive voice says in the crucial second stanza:

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
Oh, bend against the invisible; and lean  
To symbols of descending night; and search  
The glare of revelations going by!

(*OP* 10)

Bloom, who has given the poem its strongest critical attention, writes of these lines: "it is a metonymic undoing of the sky itself; the sky empties itself out into invisibility, the mirror being terrible because it is no longer even a functioning mirror."<sup>6</sup>

Bloom's reading wrenches the stanza from its exhorting voice and truncates its significance. Holding to the sky as mind trope, the reader will see that the urgent voice insists that the night sky is "terrible" for it is an awesome mirror-image of the unknown depths of the dark inner self of the human. The voice presses Blanche McCarthy to envision the not-to-be-seen, and read symbolic revelations as they make known the as-yet-unknown aspects of self:

See how the absent moon waits in a glade  
Of your dark self, and how the wings of stars,  
Upward, from unimagined coverts, fly.

(*OP* 10)

"Blanche McCarthy" may be regarded, in sympathy with Bloom, as a poem that promises the later Stevens: "his first real poem," his "true origin,"<sup>7</sup> for its denoted sense is Stevens' never-abandoned view of man as possessor of an inner source that pours forth a language of symbols: "revelations going by." A language of symbols is of the essence of poetry and its possibility is of central importance to Stevens' conception of man as a mortal whose destiny is to give a language to the natural world, creating transcendental worlds that are revelations of the unknown recesses of man's psyche.

A search for this central source is disclosed in the variations of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," written almost ten years after "Blanche McCarthy." Critical estimates of the poem have trusted to R.P. Blackmur's comment in 1932 that Stevens "wanted to present the tone, in his mind, of five different aspects of the sea."<sup>8</sup> A typical valuation is "Stevens strings together five renditions of the remembered experience" and nuances "could be added endlessly."<sup>9</sup> However, two critics sense the poem's greater potential. "This marriage of sea and sky is an analogy for the relation of mind and world," writes J. Hillis Miller, and adds, "This is the true theme of the poem."<sup>10</sup> Vendler comments, most cogently, that the poem seems "disturbingly allegorical," and says, "Perhaps our feeling that the sequential order of stanzas in 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' is important and cannot be rearranged at will convinces us that a 'meaning' beyond the visual is intended."<sup>11</sup> These undeveloped insights prove germinal when the analogical fiction of sky as mind is brought into the context of the poem. The psychological implications are complicated beyond those of "Blanche McCarthy" for there is an intervention of the imagery of the reflective sea as a presence.

The beginnings of association in imagery of sea and mind are in a letter which Stevens wrote to Elsie Moll as early as 1909. Evidently she had sent Stevens a poem of her own, and these comments—which follow the general development of each stanza in "Sea Surface"—were his response. "The verse you sent was perplexing. Just what was it that was discovered?" He goes on to develop an answer from his own imagination. "And as a mental scene, aside from remembrance, the verse had its value. —From one of many possible figures—regard the mind as a motionless sea, as it is so often. Let one round wave surge through it mystically—one mystical mental scene—one image. Then see it in abundant undulation, incessant motion—unbroken succession of scenes, say. —I indulge in heavenly psychology—I lie back and drown in the deluge. The mind rolls as the sea rolls" (L 118-19).

"Just what was it that was discovered," he inquires of Elsie. The reply to himself seems to be in a correspondence about "Sea Surface" written thirty-two years later. "It is very easy to say that the poem, starting with the discovery of one's own soul as the thing of primary importance in a world of flux, proceeds to the ultimate discovery of *mon esprit batard* as the final discovery. In that sense the poem has a meaning and the final section represents a summation" (L 389). In this letter, he suggests the nature of the poem's theme; he says, "I remember that when I wrote this particular poem I was doing a great deal of theorizing about poetry" (L 390). The word "discovery" in the letter suggests that Stevens was searching

for the source of poetry as it lives in the human psyche. The poem seems to testify that he found four aspects of self vital to the creating of an account of an intuition of reality.

One aspect is the poet speaking in reminiscence. He is a version of Narcissus who has gazed into a mirror, the sea surface, and has seen, not his own appearance as reflected in "dead glass," but his perceptions and conceptions of sky and clouds as fictionalized by the fluctuating mirror of sea surface. Surprised at the out-of-the-ordinary intuitiveness which he had "In that November off Tehuan-tepec," he asks as if about a stranger: "Who, then, evolved the sea-bloom from the clouds?" and continues to ask similarly throughout the sequence. It is a question about his earlier self, the self alert in the scene who rescued sky and clouds, paradigms for the outer world as mirrored in reflective matter, the sea, from vanishing with sensation and perception. This earlier self who "saw the mortal massives of the blooms / Of water moving on the water-floor" and "silver petals of white blooms / Unfolding in the water" is in Narcissus-like reflection. He is called, "*mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme*" (CP 99-100), etc., in another language, for, like the Indian in "The Cuban Doctor," he is in a sense a stranger not often encountered in the ordinary.

This imaginative self, a second aspect of the poet necessary for the making of poetry, undergoes continual modification as the five variations advance the psychological search. From "*mon âme*" and "*mon frère du ciel*," he becomes "*ma foi, la nonchalance divine*," a devil-may-care self who sees the libidinous in the figures of clouds as "damasks that were shaken off / From the loosed girdles in the spangling must." This earlier self falls continually to a more earthen state, becoming a spirit nameless and without a heavenly father, a shame: "*mon esprit bâtard, l'ignominie*." It is his genius that

Beheld the sovereign clouds as jugglery

And the sea as turquoise-turbaned Sambo, neat  
At tossing saucers—cloudy-conjuring sea[.]

(CP 102)

This introduction to Sambo is to an early Stevens version of the unconscious as Negro.<sup>12</sup> In "Blanche McCarthy" it is the "dark self" mirrored in the dark sky of nightfall. This third aspect of self is the source of poetry, deep in the earthen self, who juggles our sensations and perceptions, our sea-cloud thoughts. For Sambo, the "conch / Of loyal conjuration trumped"; Triton, mythical sea-god, trumpeted his conch-shell horn for Sambo as confirmation of approval. At his name "the sovereign clouds came clustering." Evidently Stevens playfully gave Sambo as name to the unconscious after reading Elsie's entry in her journal kept on their trip: "The sea as flat and still as a pan-cake, before breakfast" (L 241).<sup>13</sup> This flatness became in the poetry: "like limpid water;" "in sinister flatness," and "tranced machine." Her entry probably induced the references to food: "rosy chocolate," "breakfast jelly yellow;" etc.

In the poem, this ocean is called a machine. Stevens wrote in 1935: "A most attractive idea to me is the idea that we are all the merest biological mechanisms" (L 294). In every stanza, the speaker hints of the human indwelling in the sea-matter, finding it a perplexed, tense, tranced machine, planning dank stratagems. These are subjective experiences, and the sea itself is the symbol of a vehicle for subjectivity: the human substance. It may be well-realized from Coleridge's words: "Dare I add that genius must act on the feeling, that body is but a striving to become mind,—that it is mind in its essence!"<sup>14</sup> This is the fourth facet necessary for the creation of poetry: the human substance.

These four facets are all one person, the poet, and he has looked into a mirror of the sky and, in doing so, he has looked into his own mind. The "marriage of sea and sky," outside sky "falling" into the reflective substance, occurs only through the mediation of the poet's consciousness, for, as noted in "Madam La Fleurie": "It was only a glass because he looked in it" (CP 507). What he has not seen, outside sky and clouds, surrogates for outside reality, would seem to be "above" him, transcendent according to our common figurative language. However, being of substance, he could say, "I am part of what is real" (NA 67). As necessary source of the unreal, this gazing, conceiving self is somehow a sustaining center in a world of flux, though he, too, is ever-changing. He is part of the wave which Stevens anticipated. "Let one round wave surge through it mystically—one mystical mental scene—one image" (L 118-119). As substance, he shares with earth in the creation of the psychic episodes; and in these unrealities, he is both player and interpreter. His words may make "a world that transcends the world" (NA 130), his symbols be the "strange rhetoric" (NA 118) of a parallel between nature and the imagination. The allegorical possibilities of the poem come to a closure with the introduction of these four aspects of the poet's self. The search for a source of poetry ends in the person of the poet.

#### IV

The long time that elapsed between Stevens' letter to Elsie and the writing of "Sea Surface," almost fifteen years, does not eliminate the probability of a relationship between them. It was Stevens' characteristic that once an analogical fiction occurred to him he absorbed it as a permanent part of his repertoire. The theme of "Sea Surface," its frequent use of blue, and the stress in each stanza on such a transformation as is told in its terminus—

Then the sea  
And heaven rolled as one and from the two  
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue

(CP 102)

—suggest that this poem anticipated "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and the player's cautionary statement that "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" (CP 165). Over twelve years separated the writing of the two poems.

The introspective speaker of the earlier poem illustrated four aspects of self involved in the verbal apprehension of an unreal continually reinvented from a world of flux. The man with the blue guitar desires to analyze concept separated from matter:

To lay his brain upon the board  
And pick the acrid colors out,

To nail his thought across the door,  
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow . . .

(CP 166)

Thus he makes use of a common image that indicates concept as being "higher" than matter: winged thought suggesting a flight of fancy or imagination.

It is in poem VIII that the singer brings together figures from the earlier poems to form a symbolic world of thought. Within its imagined spaces, images of sun, moon, clouds, night, storm occur in correspondence to their originals in the outer world. In their motions these present a fiction of the mind in its cognitive processes. The stanzas at first reading appear to be a verbal picture of a morning sky beset by the chaos of a storm and the lingering obscurities of night. Two critics who deal with this poem, Joseph Riddel and Thomas Hines, interpret the brilliant confusion of the sky as a reality that overwhelms the imagination.<sup>15</sup> When at the closing lines, the player of the blue guitar states that the leaden twang of his strings has brought the storm to bear, a different, a symbolic, reading seems to be required.

The vivid, florid, turgid sky,  
The drenching thunder rolling by,

The morning deluged still by night,  
The clouds tumultuously bright . . .

(CP 169)

The symbol of sky as mind discloses the subject of the poem. "[W]here apparently the whole setting is propitious to the imagination, the imagination comes to nothing," Stevens writes about the poem (L 362). He says that "the florid, the tumultuously bright" antagonizes the imagination. It is typical that Stevens gives only a general notion of the poem's idea, and only hints at any symbolism. He had already confided that "A long time ago I made up my mind not to explain things . . . I think that the critic is under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him" (L 346).

What he has before him is a brilliant morning sky partially inundated by darkness, symbolic of the on-coming of a fresh poem that is not yet free of the dark unconscious from which the poem must emerge. There is a disorder within the poet, a storm thundering such as we find in the poem, "Man Carrying Thing,"

with its storm of thoughts all night (*CP* 350). Feeling, synonymous with music in much of Stevens' work, is weighted as in the "cold chords" of the player, but seeks to rise and join a company of birds, flocks of the generations from the singing bird of poetry. The feeling cries among the cloud-thoughts.

And the feeling heavy in cold chords  
Struggling toward impassioned choirs,

Crying among the clouds, enraged  
By gold antagonists in air—

(*CP* 169)

Feeling is enraged for this is a morning sky-mind in which not either of the gold antagonists, the sun of reason or the moon of the creative imagination, has yet triumphed, one over the other, and become dominant in the sky where there is a potential for a new poem. Stevens gave this thought in prose terms about ten years later in "Imagination as Value" when he asked, "What, then, is it to live in the mind with the imagination . . . ?" He answered, "Only the reason stands between it [the imagination] and the reality for which the two are engaged in a struggle. We have no particular interest in this struggle because we know that it will continue to go on and that there will never be an outcome" (*NA* 141).

The player's leaden twang which brought the storm of mind into being is helpless, as all reason is helpless before a real storm. The player can only let the storm in the mind take its course.

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.

(*CP* 169)

The player trusts that a resolution will come about between the gold antagonists as they take their course through the sky as mind; meanwhile he waits, receptive, for the on-coming poem.

This is allegory in that the symbols may be understood as depicting a meaning that parallels illustration. Yet explanation does not exhaust the poem as a poetic experience, for the symbols, as in almost all of Stevens' work, have a play of meaning that is not trivialized by being pointed out. For example, "gold antagonists in air," a marvel of language, are sun and moon. To the reader knowledgeable about Stevens' images, they are also symbols of reason or reality in comprehension versus the creative imagination. "Antagonists in air" enriches the phrase with an unstated quasi-psychological theory about the writing of a poem. Thus, this present poem initiates an imaginative integration of its images into a complex symbol of creative process. From its theme of failure in

creativity springs up an unwritten poem which accompanies the images in their assumed motions. In this extended poem, the "gold antagonists" continue on their way, the moon in decline, the sun rising to its triumph, the morning sky clearing. Then the singing birds, the feeling and words of the man of poetic imagination, fly as "impassioned choirs" into the sky-mind of cloud-thoughts far into the air-half above the earth-half of which they both are intrinsically part.

V

It is the player on the blue guitar who formulates into a recognizable verbal facsimile Stevens' fiction of an inner universe that is analogous to our outer world and functions as a secondary reality where feelings, words, tropes, symbols, thoughts themselves, have a place to be.

Poetry is the subject of the poem,  
From this the poem issues and

To this returns.

(CP 176)

In a comment on this poem, Stevens begins: "Poetry is the spirit . . . the poem is the body" (L 363). Poetry, then, is an essence, a quality, and cannot be more than that unless it has a body. Poetry, in its need for a body, is the subject, the dependent, therefore, of the poem. As it is being read, the poem issues forth from poetry, a general term for its essence; and at its closure, the poem returns to poetry.

Between the two,  
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,  
Things as they are. Or so we say.

(CP 176)

Between issue and return, the poem has its being in the experience of the reader. During that time there is "An absence in reality, / Things as they are. Or so we say." This indicates a break, a hole in reality, a suspension that would last until the poem's closure.

But are these separate? Is it  
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there . . .

(CP 177)

How can there be an absence in reality for the poem as it is being read? Are these separate, this "absence" and "things as they are?" The poem acquires "Its true appearances there" for unless it is being experienced by the human, a piece of earth, it has no appearances at all. It is here that the player on the blue guitar gives a miniature verbal symbol of the mental processes that allow an unreal to assume reality. These images that form the symbol are in apposition to the word "there."

. . . sun's green,  
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?  
From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,  
In the universal intercourse.

(CP 177)

The player says of the poem, "from these it takes" because the poem takes its very life from the processes of these inner secondary realities while the reader is intent on his reading.

Sun is the light of reason or comprehension whose beam scans the words of the poem as it crosses the inner time and space of the "sky that thinks." It makes the words of the poem yield, be fertile, as if in green spring and summer. (Like the sun of grassman's mind in "Esthétique du Mal" [CP 318].) Cloud is thought in the "sky that thinks," red for it is blooded within the live creature; its red also connotes morning and evening clouds, beginning and closure of a thought. "Sky that thinks" is an overarching figure of mind through which, in natural kinship, this sun and cloud take their course. It also arches over "earth feeling." "Earth feeling" is the human creature intent on the passion inspired by the body of the poem that holds the spirit of poetry.

The reader, his earthen self existing in the poem by implication, is the body of the poem, just as the poem is the body of the spirit of poetry. These, as the real and the imagined, engage in the "universal intercourse," words that hint of the sexual act. The player of the blue guitar speculates that the poem may give to the real during this engagement. In his letter about this poem, Stevens suggests of the imagination, "It does not create except as it transforms" (L 364). In the poem, he gives an instance. Through the transformative powers of Stevens' imagination, the processes of the natural world with its sun, cloud, sky and earth become transfigured into a verbal emblem of the processes of the mind: sun's green, cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks.

This analogical fiction of an inner nature, the implied motion of its symbols signifying man's cognition of a poem, has been unrecognized because Stevens' critics have tended to project his images outwardly. Vendler says, "Sky that thinks, earth feeling, are earth and sky given mind and soul, added to, made ampler than they are."<sup>16</sup> Hines writes: "The poem begins with sun, cloud, earth, and sky (all figures of reality) and adds the imagination's distortions."<sup>17</sup> The images have the character that Coleridge's words describe as a work of genius. They "make the external internal, the internal external . . . nature thought and thought nature."<sup>18</sup>

This poem, as in the tradition of the old allegories, concerns an involvement of spirit and body: the salvation of the soul in the conquest of the body. However, its lines are only a speculation given in secular terms. "Poetry is the spirit" as Stevens wrote, and "the poem is the body." Through the intercession of the poem, the spirit of poetry attains a victory by becoming a part of the real, the body of the reader, and thus as "the subject of the poem," "perhaps it gives" the reader a transcendence, an exaltation, "above" unthinking nature, as it takes its course through "the sky that thinks."

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), p. 140. Further references to this source will be cited in the text as *NA*. References to Stevens' *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf, 1957); and *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), will be cited in the text as *CP*, *OP*, and *L*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup>S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), Vol. 11, pp. 39-40.

<sup>3</sup>Vendler, *On Extended Wings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 284.

<sup>4</sup>Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 314.

<sup>5</sup>Litz, *Introspective Voyager* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 102-03.

<sup>6</sup>*Poems of Our Climate*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup>Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 62.

<sup>9</sup>David M. La Guardia, *Advance On Chaos* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), p. 42.

<sup>10</sup>Miller, "Wallace Stevens," in *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Vendler, "Wallace Stevens: The False and True Sublime," in *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>See Frank Doggett and Dorothy Emerson, "About Stevens' Comments on Several Poems," in *The Motive for Metaphor*, ed. Francis C. Blessington and Guy Rotella (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), pp. 29-32.

<sup>13</sup>Little black Sambo of the child's story of that name ate one hundred and sixty-nine pancakes after his escape from tigers. See Stevens' playful story of Elsie with her parasol and himself as Sambo in a letter dated December 7, 1908 (*L* 111).

<sup>14</sup>Coleridge, "On Poesy or Art," addendum to *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 11, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup>See Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 140; and Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), p. 72.

<sup>16</sup>*On Extended Wings*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>17</sup>*The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup>"On Poesy or Art," p. 258.

## Concepts of Irony in Wallace Stevens' Early Critics

MELITA SCHAUM

Even before the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, Wallace Stevens' affiliations with vanguard literary movements served to make him a controversial figure, implicated in the early 20th century critical struggle to identify and situate a fledgling American modernism. Stevens' emergence took place within a circle of often antithetical figures such as Alfred Kreymborg and the experimental "Others" poets, Robert Coady's magazine *Soil*, dedicated to American Dada, or the "Rogues" of Allen and Louise Norton's Greenwich Village circle, a group "smacking of the 1890's in London" (Kreymborg, *Troubadour* 218). As a result, Stevens' early reception among the critics was a confused, often polemical affair—yet beyond the issues of Stevens' publication, circulation, and literary affiliations, the fact remains that new and experimental movements in poetry were creating a correlative upheaval in criticism. It was a time for the questioning and readjustment of general aesthetic standards, in response to a new poetry which resisted traditional interpretation.

A number of scholars see early Stevens criticism as an attempt to "define Stevens's style, to place him in a tradition" (Ehrenpreis 37), interpreting the controversy over Stevens' acceptance in the 1910s and 1920s as a question of French vs. American aesthetics, or what Abbie Willard calls "the issue of Stevens' literary heritage" (Willard 54). This would be an ideal theory if it could be substantiated in the criticism itself, but as a viable pattern to early Stevens criticism the European/American debate remains secondary. Irvin Ehrenpreis names Rene Taupin, Alfred Kreymborg, and John Gould Fletcher as indicators of Stevens' "French" background; however, these critics' statements are ambivalent at best.

Taupin's study of Symbolism, *L'Influence du symbolisme française sur la poesie americaine* (1929), mentions Wallace Stevens as a poet who "knows French verse well. He has even translated French poems; but," Taupin writes, "he has not imitated them . . ." (275 italics mine). Taupin does point out that the spirit of the French language can be seen in Stevens' verse—the "elegance and nuance" of vocabulary, the use of exclamatory and interrogative sentence structures, and the "subtleties of expression" of the French style—but Taupin agrees with Gorham Munson that Stevens is "completely American" in temperament (277). In all, Taupin's study seems more to adulate the refinement of language which the author attributes to the French than to truly attempt to place Stevens in a fixed heritage.

In a similar way, critics like John Gould Fletcher were spanning the question of Stevens' literary characteristics with such ambiguous statements as: "he carefully dresses his verses in the latest French mode. Only the vague sense of disquiet, pulsing underneath, proves him to be essentially American" (*Chapbook* 28). Compare Alfred Kreymborg's portrait of Stevens as "neither a misanthrope nor a snob, but one of the wisest and subtlest of natives: an American reared on French Symbolism, on the philosophic poetry of the aristocratic Jules Laforgue.

Not to mention an older race: the aristocratic Elizabethans" (*Our Singing Strength* 502). Again, Kreymborg's crediting of Stevens with international, pan-historic qualities seems more a general compliment to the poet than a true search for literary lineage.

In the works of other critics such as Conrad Aiken and Louis Untermeyer the question of French vs. American traits was quite evidently subsumed under more encompassing issues of poetic theory. Aiken and Untermeyer were the first to bring Stevens into the critical fray, in a skirmish on the pages of *The New Republic* of May 10, 1919. Their articles, titled respectively "The Ivory Tower I" and "The Ivory Tower II," reflect the two essential—and essentially antagonistic—ideologies in early 20th century American criticism which battled over Stevens' inclusion in the canon.

Willard attempts to paraphrase the Aiken-Untermeyer debate: "is [Stevens] part of the 'lustihood' and 'democracy' of Americanism or to be associated with the magical and elaborated art for art's sake of French Impressionism?" (54). This summary, however, provides too narrow a frame for their controversy. Although Untermeyer does attempt to create a hierarchy of "American" authors, it is a group from which Stevens is notably absent. Conversely, nowhere does Aiken attempt to associate Stevens with any foreign or domestic influence—in fact, he questions the very suppositions inherent in tracing literary lineage, the classification of authors and works into schools which deny their complexity and individuality. "[It] is not a question of American against European," writes Aiken in his 1919 collection *Scepticism*, of which "The Ivory Tower" comprised a final chapter, "it is simply a question of whether the given poem has beauty, subtlety, intensity and depth, or whether it has not, and in what degree" (295). The question here is one of standards, of general ideologies rather than the facile labeling of Stevens as participator in "frivolous, imported vogues." As Untermeyer himself claims, the debate encompasses "the direct impact of two opposed theories . . . the aesthetic policy in art and the humanist approach toward it" (60).

Aiken's essay questions Untermeyer's "acrimonious antipathies" towards Stevens and other poets: Pound and the Imagists, Eliot, Bodenheim, Kreymborg and the "Others." He opens his attack on Untermeyer's collection *The New Era in American Poetry* with a short dissertation on the implicated nature of the poet-critic, who, by Aiken's own confession, is "vitaly concerned with the success or failure of this or that particular strain of work." The benefits of "warmth" and "intensity" in criticism resulting from this unavoidable bias are balanced by the drawback of "unreliability" in matters requiring critical objectivity. Although Aiken concedes that "this unreliability will be diminished . . . in the degree in which the critic is aware of his bias and makes allowances for it," he feels that Untermeyer has neglected this primary step of self-awareness—we might almost say hermeneutical awareness—and failed to recognize his own bias, not only as a poet, but as an essentially reactionary poet in an era "destined for rapid changes."

Untermeyer's critical policy, as articulated in this review, propounds a combination of "Americanism, lustihood, glorification of reality (facing of the world of fact), democracy" as standards in judging poetry—premises which can be traced

to Untermeyer's New Humanistic belief in art as "community expression." According to Aiken's sardonic paraphrase: "away, therefore, with the pernicious doctrine of 'art for art's sake'; and down with the ivory tower. Art has a human function to perform." For Untermeyer, art must bear a "message," reflect social consciousness in general, and in particular demonstrate a type of nationalism which portrays American art as vigorous, passionate, enthusiastic, straightforward.

Aiken, however, sees these premises as revealing a critical "shortsightedness and viciousness," resting on ultimately unsound metaphysical, sociological, and nationalistic foundations. More concretely, they have led Untermeyer to miss the "finer note" in modern American poetry and to erect as a result a ludicrous literary canon which

has cast into undue prominence the work of Oppenheim, Giovannitti, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Alter Brody; it has put a wrong emphasis on the work of Sandburg; and, per contra, it has thrown into shadow by no means deserved the work of such poets as do not, in Mr. Untermeyer's opinion, fulfill their social contracts—such poets as T.S. Eliot, John Gould Fletcher, Wallace Stevens, Maxwell Bodenheim, the Imagists, and the entire strain in poetry for which they inconspicuously stand.

As might be expected, Aiken challenges Untermeyer's neglect of aesthetic principles in favor of sociological considerations and the subsequent judging of art as limited communal expression:

Are we to conclude from these premises that art is any the less art because it fails to satisfy a contemporary hunger for this or that social change? Are we to conclude that art is any the more richly art because it bears conspicuously and consciously the label "Made in America"?

Social and national concerns, furthermore, are "local and temporary: they change like the fashions . . . the odds are great that what is a burning issue today will be a familiar fact, and the occasion of a yawn tomorrow."

Instead, Aiken advocates the "absolute poetry" of Stevens, Eliot, Kreymborg, and the "Others" group, a poetry which

delivers no message, is imbued with no doctrine, a poetry which exists only for the sake of magic—magic of beauty on one hand, magic of reality on the other, both struck at rather through a play of implication than through matter-of-fact statement. . . . It is the be-all and end-all of such poetry that it should be a perfectly formed and felt work of art: and the greater the elaboration and subtlety consistent with such perfection the more inexhaustible will it be, the longer it will endure.

"Art is art," Aiken concludes, "not sociology, not philosophy."

Although critics such as Willard read a simplified art-pour-l'art stance into Aiken's theory, a close reading of Aiken's rhetoric reveals a deeper level of ideology—an ideology in which art *is* sociology, *is* philosophy, is in fact a penetration of human and ontological reality of an alternate but equally salient kind. In comparing Whitman to Poe as examples, respectively, of theories of art as social consciousness and art for art's sake, Aiken questions whether the latter poet's tendency does not reflect just as valid a communal concern and human "hunger" as does Whitman's:

is such an art as Poe's, which as well as any illustrates the virtues and defects of the theory of art for art's sake, a whit the less a form of community expression, a whit the less satisfying to the human hunger for articulation, than such an art as Mr. Untermeyer seems to favor?

Aiken contends that the poems of Eliot, Fletcher, Stevens and company "are clearly finer and more universal in appeal than anything yet given us by Oppenheim, Giovannitti, Wood, or Brody."

But not only are Aiken's "absolute" poets more articulate than Untermeyer's group; Aiken goes on to question the latter poets' integrity altogether as "deliverers of the 'message.'" The "message" which Untermeyer's poets bear—and, implicitly, their inclusion in Untermeyer's collection because it is the message he wants to hear—stands as a "primitively naive" statement of unquestioned affirmation and faith. It is a poetry, for Aiken, of

the explicitly affirmative (what Nietzsche termed the "yea-saying"), the triumphantly and not too reflectively acceptant; the vigorous, in short, rather than the cerebral or oblique or disillusioned, the enthusiastic and downright or sanely sentimental rather than the interpretative or analytic or psychologically tenuous.

The "affirmative" against the "disillusioned," the "acceptant" against the "analytic," the "sanely sentimental" against the exploratively "tenuous" mind—in short, the superficial and mystified against the ironic mentality is the issue at play here. It is here that we find the crux of Aiken's ideology—and that in general of the early critical attitude receptive to the perplexities of language and the mental rigor of a poetry such as Wallace Stevens'. Underlying this criticism is a basic *Weltanschauung* based on the ironic "seeing-through" of accepted order to face relativity, chaos, flux, and disillusion—an attitude for Aiken and others psychologically and ontologically more "real" than Untermeyer's wishfully censored "world of fact." It is this concept of seeing-through traditional stabilities of religion, society, human nature, even the referentiality of language, which runs as a theme through most early criticism of Stevens' work.

As a keystone to early Stevens criticism, the concept of irony—and of irony's varied manifestations—was informed by a reassessment of reality and a subse-

quent emphasis on the realism of relative, individual expression. Three major areas around which controversy took place in regards to Stevens' poetry were the question of "meaning" in Stevens' work, Stevens' use of language, and the artist's persona within his poetry. More specifically, the underlying debate became one dealing with an ironical world-view, linguistic irony, and the character of the ironist in modern life and letters.

Aiken's attack on Untermeyer introduces this concept of differing world-views, Aiken's receptivity to Stevens, Pound, Eliot, and other modernists reflecting his appreciation of their greater rigor of thought, complexity of expression, and skeptical stance in seeing past nostalgic, handed-down attitudes of affirmation. Untermeyer's rebuttal, on the other hand, is replete with praise for poetry's "unconquerable affirmation," its "faith" and "confidence of soul," and the poet's "striving to confirm some sort of God":

the artist is more of a child; illusion buoys him up; a naive assurance sweeps him on. A belief in the beauty and immortality of life, a belief so neatly scorned by Mr. Aiken, possesses him and is at the heart of his fullest achievement. No major art has ever existed and, with a few brilliant exceptions, no art-work has ever survived that has not been built on faith.

Untermeyer's stress on "spirituality" and "moral passion" brings him close to the neo-Augustan tenets of New Humanism calling for universal norms and values as the test of art. Untermeyer claims for art the duty of "glorified communication, a sharing of life," and towards such ends the "mere verbal legerdemain of the Pound-Stevens-Arensberg-Others group" falls far short of Untermeyer's program. Even stylistically, Untermeyer denounces this group for its unreadability, insisting that "the great workers are simple and direct, never . . . secret or obscure."

But "secrecy" and "obscurity" became, for critics operating under alternate standards, a favorable aspect of Stevens' work. For a critic such as Llewelyn Powys, Stevens' obscurity stood as a mimetic technique reflective of the nature of the world itself:

And it may well be that Stevens' eccentric verse does actually reveal more of the insecure fluctuating secrets of the universe than are to be found in other more sedate, more decorous artistic creations. Wavering, uncertain, bereft of ancient consolations, the human race comes more and more to realize that it has won to consciousness in a world in which all is relative and undulating . . .

From king to beggar we are aware of our manifold delusions, aware that nothing is as false as the face value of things. We have, alas! grown only too cognizant of the essential mendacity of the physical aspects of a universe that has no bottom. And this being so, it is perhaps in suggestions, in mere phantasms, that we come nearest to the evocations of

that fourth-dimensional consciousness which may well be furthest removed from illusion. If the surface of the visible world then is nothing, who can tell but that the shadows of the surface of the visible world may be everything? And no poet, not Baudelaire, not Edgar Allan Poe even, has revealed with a surer touch, a surer ambiguity, the very shades and tinctures of this indefinable borderland than has this ultramodern supersubtle lawyer from the confines of Hartford, Connecticut. (45)

Another critical advocate of Stevens' "sure ambiguity" and his reflection of the "bottomless universe" was *Poetry* magazine's editorial assistant and critic, Marjorie Allen Seiffert. In a review of 1923, she too casts Stevens in the light of consummate re-presenter of the fluctuating cosmos. "Mr. Stevens doesn't mean to be any more illuminating than life itself," begins this review redolent with images of irony and the penetration of illusion to achieve the "substratum of reality." In Stevens' poetry, as in life, "accustomed realities are concealed, . . . emotion lurks behind design, . . . we must peer through" in order to glimpse a reality which "flits into obscurity" (154-160). John Gould Fletcher as well, in an essay of 1923, echoes Seiffert and Powys' defense of Stevensian evanescence. The poet's "obscurity comes from a wealth of meaning and allusion which are unavoidable," writes Fletcher; Stevens remains preoccupied with "something more important than externals" (*Freeman*).

But it is Maxwell Bodenheim who perhaps articulates most fully the ironic world-view reflected by Stevens, the casting-off of accepted stabilities and standards. For Bodenheim the poet exhibits a mentality in which "forms, colors, and substances take on their actual shapes and throw off the distortions, false grandeurs, and sleekly emotional lies which men have fastened on them" (96). Stevens' bringing forth of his subjects into reality and out of "that unreality concocted by man to soothe his baffled life" stands, for Bodenheim, as a valuable characteristic of the new poetry.

The old emotional eloquence, dramatic ecstasies of phraseology, and suave oratory with which most poets have always addressed birds, trees, flowers, and the lives of men, is disappearing, and in its place there has been born a struggle on the part of the poet to wrestle with the concrete forms about him . . . This battle, in which wood becomes wood and stone becomes stone and the poet sees the wood and stone that lie within himself and breaks them into articulate variations—this battle is not a new one. . . . It is the abstracted, impersonal glare of eyes that do not seek to judge, praise, or blame, but are immersed in patiently subtracting and multiplying the bare words, expressions, forms, and colors of life, in order to arrive at the nearest possible approach to the sum total of their essence. (97)

Bodenheim's view of this new type of phenomenology, this "attempt to unearth an inner reality which often conflicts with the surface plausibility and visual false-

ness which men have ever called 'reality,'” not surprisingly lauds Wallace Stevens as a major modern voice.

It was not only Stevens' implicit ideology, but his use of the medium which alarmed and perplexed yet another contingent of critics. An anonymous 1923 review in *Bookman*, referring to Stevens' "gay diablerie in arranging grotesque word patterns which seem quite liberated from time and space and prosody and all the other ills to which the flesh is heir" (483), echoes in a tongue-in-cheek way the more vituperative objections to Stevens' calculated irreverence for the univalence and referentiality of language. Stevens' "gorgeous," exotic vocabulary and syntax displeased critics bent on preserving the communicative clarity of Louis Untermeyer's "simple and direct" standard for poetic diction. As late as 1936, John Holmes could write of Stevens that he was "one of the most successful non-communicating poets of his day" (294), and during the critical controversy over Stevens in the 1910s and 1920s his use of language was a persistent issue.

Untermeyer was at the helm of opposition to Stevens' play with the traditional stabilities of language, charging him with a "determined obscurity" and an "uncertainty of communication . . . which leads one to doubt whether its author even cares to communicate in a tongue familiar to the reader" (*Yale Review* 159-160). Other critics retreated behind either mild ridicule or dismissal, but virtually no early review of Stevens fails to note the difficulties of his language. Laura Riding and Robert Graves, in their 1927 overview, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, examine this reaction against innovative uses of language as a protective attitude toward the safety of the "accepted code" of speech. Modernist literature, in its attempt to freshen clichés of language and thought, often disturbed those with a more conservative, social, proprietary stand toward language. For Riding and Graves, however, a renewed contact with language in poetry runs parallel to a renewed contact with the universe, thought, reality—an enterprise needed in an age of "safe" and stereotyped thought. They examine a reviewer's antagonism toward what he sees as alienating, anti-social uses of language in modernist poetry. The reviewer writes:

It is as if [modernist poetry's] object were to express that element only in the poet's nature by virtue of which he feels himself an alien in the universe, or at least an alien from what he takes to be the universe acknowledged by the rest of mankind.

Riding and Graves respond:

But the truth is that "the rest of mankind" is for the most part totally unaware of the universe and constantly depends on the poet to give it a second-hand sense of the universe through language. Because this language has been accepted ready-made by "the rest of mankind" without understanding the reasons for it, it becomes, by "progress," stereotyped and loses its meaning; and the poet is called upon again to remind people what the universe really looks and feels like, that is, what language

means. If he does this conscientiously he must use language in a fresh way or even, if the poetical language has grown too stale and there are few pioneers before him, invent new language. But, if he does, he will be certain to antagonize for a while those who keep asking poetry to do their more difficult thinking for them. (94-95)

New language for a new perspective, for contact with a new "reality" became a characteristic of the new poets, accompanied by their demand for more rigorous and original thought. Discovering the richness of language demanded a shattering of language's accepted social uses, the surface order of a univalent public speech. Raymond Holden was another early critic who recognized Stevens' penetration of the assumed stability of language as an exploration of the multidimensionality of words:

Mr. Stevens, either consciously or unconsciously, believes that words uttered or written may have a value separate from their meaning in terms of human speech. When it is considered that *yaitzo* and *egg*, very different sounds indeed, have exactly the same meaning, the one in Russian and the other in English, it may be agreed that the actual significance of sound cannot universally be in its use in any given language. It is not, therefore, stretching the point to any dangerous degree, to say that there is, in syllables written and pronounced, a sense value differing from, if not entirely independent of, their meaning to the literate mind. After all it is the illiterate portion of the mind which covets the subtler music of the world. I feel that Mr. Stevens has addressed himself to this covetousness with conspicuous success. (17-18)

Whether viewing it as a violation or a liberation, a deliberate obscuring of sense or an ironic seeing-through to new senses, nearly every critic needed to address the novelty of vocabulary and perplexing blend of simplicity with gorgeous, tangled language in Stevens' poetry. Analyses of the function and significance of poetic language reveal much about critical assumptions—from a denigration of the poet's breach of normal communicative standards, to praise for Stevens' sensuous musical skill with language as nonreferential medium, to attempts to define innovative language as a heightened contact with the universe or the self. Stevens' use of language even took on nationalistic significance for a critic like Harriet Monroe whose essay "The Free Verse Movement in America" (1924) addresses the problems and strictures for American poets working with an "inherited language" from England, a language which "means inherited racial traditions and loyalties, inherited literary forms and practices. It means acceptance instead of creation, acquiescence instead of a fresh adventure" (*English Journal* 691). For Monroe, experiments in language and sound such as those employed by Stevens suggest a breaking of handed-down conventions and a move into a new, individual poetry.

The ironic use of language represented an exploration and discovery of new levels beyond the standard sense of language, much as the ironic *Weltanschauung* of Stevens and other modernists represented a seeing-through to a more fluid and complex sense of reality. Yet we must distinguish the concept of irony as the "message" of a certain world-order (or lack thereof) from the sense of irony as "attitude" or posture in the poetic persona. Where the ironic world-view *pointed out* a perplexing cosmos, a "bottomless" 20th century universe, the ironic attitude stood as a *reaction* to that apprehension of flux and relativity. Stevens' stance as ironist is one which critics have continually tried to identify and either praise or dismiss. Much early criticism explores the ironic persona in Stevens' poetry, labeling him Pierrot, humorist, urbane intellectual, agonized clown, dandy, Augustan wit, cynic, spectator, cerebralist—among other titles which serve either to commend or indict the poet. One of the major early objections to Stevens was his supposedly "inhuman" voice: Stevens as pure, icy intellectual without emotions, without the requisite "humanity," a characteristic which others in various ways attempt to commend, explain, or deny.

An interesting analysis of the modernist poetic attitude is again provided by Riding and Graves. The authors identify the "Lost Generation" and its sense of gloom—one different, however, from two previous demonstrations of "gloom" in literary history: the Byronic and the "decadence" of the 1890s. For the modern generation, the loss of ideals presents less a sense of crisis and despair than a type of "sophistication" and maturity of vision, breeding a correspondent cynicism and "common sense" in their approach to life, reality, and art. Even this "common sense," however, differs from its traditional definition in being "not of the substance of happy platitudes, but of hard wit." The modernists are a generation without sentimentality—and so without pessimism, since, according to Riding and Graves, "pessimism is sentimental." Instead, this generation announces "a drastic alteration in traditional values; but without the violence characteristic of minds that have reached this stage by more emotional paths. . . . It must not only revise traditional values; it must appreciate new ones" (224-227).

For Riding and Graves, the new poetry's penetrating, ironic vision is marked by certain characteristics and devices which must be understood in order to understand the poetry. Self-mockery becomes an important element in a poetry which recognizes the dilemma of art in the modern age—a Crispin-like type of "formal clownishness" which nonetheless demonstrates the need as well as the futility of creation. For the modern artist, furthermore, his burlesque is "pure burlesque," a "tearless, heartless" clowning divorced from a sense of audience. His humor is subtle, aristocratic, rarefied to the point where it excludes a common audience, and in precisely this exclusion it creates a vehicle with which to conduct its "bright game of spite against the middle classes," its "jokes against modern civilization" (247).

But the modern artist is not only engaged in a game of sniping and destruction. There is a revitalizing neutrality on his part towards "poetical items that have been worn out by spiritual elevation," a move toward new subjects and styles

which refresh poetry, towards a play with language which renews the energy of the medium and demonstrates the "Protean powers" of poetry and the imagination. Riding and Graves conclude their chapter with a description of the paradoxical positions of the modernist poet, an equipoise of humor and seriousness, an infinity-mirror of double irony:

He completes and in a sense contradicts his clownishness by revealing that even clownishness is a joke: that it is a joke to be writing poetry, a joke to be writing modernist poetry. By this token he belongs to the most serious generation of poets that has ever written; with the final self-protective corollary, of course, that it is also a joke to be serious. (251)

This complex irony-within-irony of the modernist poet and his attitude towards reality, art, and his own situation foreshadows many of the problems which more traditional critics encountered in assessing Stevens, distinctly a poet of this self-conscious, humorous-serious, ironic generation. Gorham Munson, for instance, attempts to accommodate Stevens' disturbing irony in terms of the antiquated figure of the "dandy." Munson interprets Stevens to demonstrate that "life as a spectacle is disturbing and horrifying as well as interesting and delightful: it is inevitably tossed by the 'torments of confusion' and the dandy, to preserve his values, to maintain his urbane order and demeanor, must perforce adopt protective measures" (75). For Munson, it is a system of personal self-defense which informs Stevens' verse: "The safeguards that Stevens employs to keep the 'torments of confusion' from rumpling his attitude are three: wit, speculation, and reticence" (76). Stevens' art becomes, in the face of the disturbing nature of the universe, "a minute but sustained harmony floating above the chaos of life. It is whole and understandable and therefore a refuge in a life that is too fragmentary and perplexing. It, being form, is a polite answer to the hugeness which we cannot form" (87).

Harriet Monroe also recognizes the "malaise of our time, its bitter suffering, its conviction of futility," yet also sees Stevens as an ironist of a politer vein, one of "the race of great humorists" rather than a craftsman of "agonized irony" like T.S. Eliot (*Poetry* 323). Considering Monroe's history of editorial antipathy toward Eliot, she not surprisingly commends Stevens' greater civility, his lighter touch in the face of an age of crisis. Marjorie Allen Seiffert continues the *Poetry* standard in complimenting Stevens as light, urbane ironist. "One has had so much of the heavy poets," she writes, "that it is sheer delight to find one who handles his matter without the *grand sérieux*" (156).

But while Stevens was being sketched as the disinterested humorist and dandy by the subtle conservatism evident in such journals as *Poetry* or Munson's brand of New Humanism, a critic like Paul Rosenfeld saw another, bleaker strain in Stevens' ironic attitude. Rosenfeld's essay dwells on the futility at the heart of Stevens' verse, comparing him to a Pierrot figure "of a distinct Laforguan cut" whose verse turns "melancholy soliloquy" into "a silvery music signifying nothing . . . a bland, curiously philosophical movement of the soul without signifi-

cation." Rosenfeld's extensive character-sketch of the Pierrot/Stevens figure portrays the modern artist caught in an aggressive, internal struggle:

Uncomfortably self-aware, the pitiable gentleman can never quite spend himself in living, and remains emotionally naive, O Horrors! as a romantic poet. To be sure, little in his mask betrays him. Pierrot is sophisticated, worldly, lettered, read in philosophical authors Greek and Germanic. He is excessively correct, partly from natural elegance and partly in protest against romantic dishevelment; and functions suavely as reader to an empress, teller of a London bank, or lawyer in Hartford, Connecticut. Nevertheless, his unprojected energies and nobilities and grandiosities are perpetually assuming the shapes of self-pity, yearning for enveloping love, and woman-worship; and although Pierrot is entirely too aware to mistake them for cosmic pains or enchantments of the heart, his sentimentalities threaten endlessly to overcome him, and add immeasurably to his embarrassment. Hence his ideal self, the cruelly murdered "I-the-Magnificent," incapable of revealing itself in all its princeliness, gains satisfaction in the shape of revenge. It takes the exaltations of the subjective emotional self, and very archly turns them into parody. Of melancholy soliloquy and philosophical dudgeon it makes a silvery music signifying nothing. (151)

Rosenfeld's analysis—or psychoanalysis—of the Pierrot-figure caught in a dilemma of desire for emotion and scorn for emotion, his potential for greatness thwarted, who seeks revenge in the parodying of great human emotions—love, worship, sorrow—and renders them hollow, is surprisingly close to those objections by humanist critics whose primary criterion for art was an affirmation of human values and the moral imagination.

Rosenfeld's aesthetic involvement in Stevens' style, however, draws him into a dilemma towards the end of his essay. He attempts to straddle both a humanist and an aesthetic position in his final evaluation of Stevens. Articulating the humanist call for verbal simplicity and sincere emotion, Rosenfeld states that an "impulse in us bids authors be more simple and direct, and give completely what they feel; above all to advance from behind the curtain of language" (160). Yet he immediately confesses that "*Harmonium* remains one of the jewel boxes of contemporary verse . . . Stevens is revealed as an almost impeccable craftsman . . . his idiom [is] new and delicious" (161). Rosenfeld colors that "curtain of language" with an Impressionistic sensuality which belies his desire for the poet to "advance from behind it" for any reason, let alone simplicity and directness.

Rosenfeld's dilemma reflects a confusion of standards in the assessment of poetry which can roughly be termed the battle between emotion and craftsmanship. Other critics faced this evaluative choice in dealing with Stevens' poetry. Some, like Edmund Wilson, could commend Stevens' brilliance of craft and sophistication of thought, yet complain about his lack of feeling, choosing over Stevens a poet like E. E. Cummings who, despite his "adolescence . . . is not im-

pervious to life" as Stevens is (103). For Wilson, Stevens' ultimate irony lies in the surface richness of the poetry concealing an inner "aridity" of feeling—a portrait not unlike that of Rosenfeld's Pierrot. Untermeyer also denounced Stevens' poetry as frigid, claiming "there is little of the human voice in these glittering lines," and taking a predictably firm stand in favor of those poets emphasizing "passion" rather than style (*Yale Review* 159-160).

Mark Van Doren also raises the question of audience in regards to Stevens' ironic attitude. He sees Stevens as one of a handful of "wits" in 20th century poetry, but disparages Stevens' use of a humor which is "tentative, perverse, and superfine . . . it will never be popular . . . Mr. Stevens will never be much read" (400). Despite the obvious failure of Van Doren's prediction, he does reveal an implicit criterion of popularity and communication which informed much criticism averse to Stevens' style. It was a theoretical stance in direct opposition to Riding and Graves' theory of the "pure burlesque" of modernism and the general avant-garde drive toward a complexity irreverent toward public taste or intellect.

Edna Lou Walton's essay "Beyond the Wasteland" attempts to mediate between Stevens' complicated, apparently private irony and the needs of his readers. Walton sees Stevens as the last in a line of "Wasteland theory" poets, having to deal with the "emotional ennui" of the modern age which was described by Eliot and left for further poets to explore. For Walton, Stevens' "problem" in the light of this legacy is a different one than Yvor Winters' "hopelessness" or Archibald MacLeish's "desperate" return to the desert. Stevens was, instead, faced with the problem of being a "poet of the senses . . . what was he to do in death valley?" His poetic answer, therefore, consisted in exploring every emotion, every mood, with, however, "a full realization of its several anti-moods . . . No feeling is more than acknowledged before it splays out into a dozen different and antithetical feelings" (263). Rather than limit himself to one emotion—or none—Stevens explores the difficult simultaneity of all emotions, the unresolved contradictions inherent in love, beauty, imagination. For Walton, Stevens' seemingly super-refined style is both appropriate, necessary, and redemptive:

Stevens's highly mannered, technically superb verse is so written because it best expresses his particular creative imagination: to this mind no simple statement is possible, every word has innumerable associations. This poet is sincere in being insincere . . . His sincerity lies in his attitude. Moreover if Stevens is over-refined, it is only because we still measure refinement by the normal bluntness preserving the ordinary man for his mechanical world—not by the truer instrument of the sensitive imagination. Refinement is all we have today of exuberance and vitality. (263-264)

Early critics receptive to Stevens could herald his uses of irony as a regeneration of language, a revitalization of intellect, and the exhibition of a mature worldview. But the polemical confrontation between tenets of "humanism" and "aestheticism" continued in Stevens criticism and in the working-out of a viable mod-

ern poetics. Stevens plays a central role in the "battle of the books" of 1930, in which the successive publication of the collections *Humanism in America* and *The Critique of Humanism* drew into confrontation such names as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Stewart Pratt Sherman against Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur, and Edmund Wilson. The New Critics' treatment of Stevens needed to exercise a careful redefinition of morality in aesthetics, the nature of artistic communication, and the function of poetry in the modern age. But early advocates of Stevens had laid valuable groundwork for subsequent theory. Their delimitation of Stevens' uses of irony introduced an important pattern in a modernist attitude which needed to express and accommodate, confront and survive, the new 20th century.

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## Allusions to Keats in Wallace Stevens' "Autumn Refrain"

MARY JOAN EGAN

The interpretation of Wallace Stevens as unemotional, cerebral, and philosophical is changing as the passion implicit in his poetry is increasingly recognized. For example, Helen Vendler's recent *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* has as a major premise that he was "a poet of ecstatic or despairing moments."<sup>1</sup> She expands upon Stevens' now acknowledged affinity with the Romantics—Shelley, Coleridge, and especially Keats. This is one of her cogent insights: "Stevens had so absorbed Keats that Keats acted in his mind as a perpendicular from which he constructed his own oblique poems: what we see as a secrecy of allusion was for Stevens no secrecy but rather an exfoliation of a continuing inner dialogue with Keats."<sup>2</sup> Stevens found the modes of literary Romanticism, paradoxically, to be both necessary and difficult for the modern poet to adopt. This involvement, which informs a great deal of his most popular poetry, is well illustrated by his use of allusions to two of John Keats's odes in his "Autumn Refrain."<sup>3</sup>

Stevens' use of allusion is always unusual. His references to other poems are difficult to detect and even more difficult to relate to their new contexts. He gives just enough detail to indicate what is being referred to, and then almost deliberately obscures its relevance to his own poem. The variety of uses to which he puts his allusions reveals much about Stevens' uniqueness. Effects range from a simple ironic juxtaposition of ideas to a highly complex assimilation in which the meaning of the older poem becomes a part of a pseudological progression to a totally fresh conclusion. He never presses for absolute congruity, but uses his allusive material freely and always in subordination to his own purposes.

The frequency of his overt references to Keats in both poetry and prose indicates an abiding esteem that makes an understanding of "Autumn Refrain" more important in the assessment of Stevens' work than a first encounter with this rather slight, almost unattractively self-pitying lyric would indicate. Close examination reveals that the poem is concerned with a contrast between its speaker's situation and attitude and those of the speakers of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn." It achieves a curious double allusion to the blended sound imagery of the two odes: there are too many verbal parallels with both of them to leave any doubt about Stevens' intentions. His lines, "The sorrows of sun, too, gone . . . the moon and moon, / The yellow moon of words about the nightingale / In measureless measures," recall Keats's "maturing sun" in "To Autumn" and "haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, . . . But here there is no light" in "Ode to a Nightingale." He parodies the sound of "bleat" and "twitter" in "To Autumn" with his "skreak and skritter."

The Keats poems are splendid examples of sense-imagery; the Stevens poem proposes that any pleasurable sensory impression (even the cawing of grackles) that the poet could have enjoyed has disappeared long since. In "Ode to a Night-

ingale" the chief operative sense informing the imagination is that of hearing; indeed, Keats stresses at several points that seeing is not involved at all. When the nightingale flies away, the entire imaginative moment becomes illusory and suspect. In "To Autumn" the pleasurable impression of the season is enhanced by the "music" of the final stanza. Stevens' poem is organized by his despondency over the absence of music, particularly the nightingale's. The "skreak and skritter" that he has heard corresponds to the sounds of the mourning gnats, bleating lambs, singing hedge-crickets, whistling red-breast, and twittering swallows in "To Autumn." The ensuing silence (he uses the word "gone" three times in the brief poem) holds an after-image like that of the ending of "Ode to a Nightingale." But the similarities only serve to dramatize the radical difference between the environments of the two poets. The Stevens poem is merely a refrain, not an ode; and the desolation the poem describes is more anguished than the forlornness of "Ode to a Nightingale" and totally different from the sense of heavy fruitfulness of "To Autumn." There is a contrived hesitation, achieved by much repetition and frequent pauses, that implies a palpable sense of loss. The repetition in line 12 of the anacoluthon of line 7 indicates that the speaker must keep reminding himself that he is forever deprived of nightingales. He has only names—and at times not even that much: "the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air." Modern reality vitiates the rich imagery available in the past, and the impoverished poet must fall back upon "grackles" and, more to the point, "words" for the reality that informs his vision.

Nevertheless, there is a vision. The "skreaking and skrittering residuum" creates the same mood, after all, as the experience presented by Keats. The "residuum" that "grates" bears a strong contrast to the "full-throated ease" of the nightingale's song in the "melodious plot," but the "evasions" echo Keats's final loss and bewilderment: "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf. . . . Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?" "Evasion" is a word that Stevens uses several times in his canon to convey the ultimately insubstantial nature of the poetic encounter. In "Credences of Summer" (CP 373), for example, he directs his reader to "Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky / Without evasion by a single metaphor." Reality must be experienced; the poet must grasp it in order to engender the imaginative enterprise. Furthermore, the Supreme Fiction can be approached but never permanently possessed. However, Stevens' own lyricism, the total sound structure of "Autumn Refrain" in this instance, is itself a triumph over bleak reality. Evasion though it may be and however elusive the experience, the emotional response to the sounds of nature is more than mere escapism.

Taken as a whole, "Autumn Refrain" is an ambiguous expression of simultaneous longing for and dismissal of the Romantic fulfillment in the experience of nature. Vendler's Chapter 2, "Desire: The Lover, the Believer, and the Poet," bears out this reading. She cites a number of poems to show that Stevens' anguish stemmed from his longing to experience desire and its consummation and his inability to find an object of desire.<sup>4</sup> Despair is alleviated, finally, when the speaker wrings from "stillness" a mood similar to the one felt by Keats's persona in the

"words about the nightingale"—the ode that the speaker has evidently been the more deeply involved with. The modern Romantic melancholy is more piercing, especially for Stevens, because it is rooted in a more inimical reality. The poem thus reveals much about Stevens' total attitude toward "the Romantic," and succinctly illustrates both his nostalgic but stoic feelings about Romanticism and his sense of the modern poet's frustrations.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>Vendler, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954). Hereafter cited as *CP*.

<sup>4</sup>Vendler, pp. 29-43.

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

**Wallace Stevens Society  
1985 MLA Program  
Chicago**

**Topic: Stevens and the Question of Belief I**

Saturday, December 28, 1985

7:15-8:30 p.m., Atlanta, WT, Hyatt

Presiding: Milton J. Bates, Marquette University

1. "Santayana and the Closed Door," Alan Filreis, University of Pennsylvania
2. "'From finikin to fine finikin': Stevens' Measure of Belief," Margaret Dickie, University of Illinois
3. "Can We Believe in Fictions?" C. Barry Chabot, Miami University

**Topic: Stevens and the Question of Belief II**

Sunday, December 29, 1985

12:00 noon-1:15 p.m., Columbus A and B, ET, Hyatt

Presiding: Milton J. Bates, Marquette University

1. "'The thesis of the plentifullest John': A Rhetorical Approach to Belief in Stevens' Language," Terrance King, Wayne State University
2. "Poetry as Proof: How to Finesse the Problem of Belief," Charles Altieri, University of Washington
3. "Imagination and Belief: Wallace Stevens and William James," Ihab Hassan, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

## Harold Bloom's "Notes" Toward Self-Canonization

LYNDA R. GOLDSTEIN

A strong poem does not *formulate* poetic facts any more than a strong reading or criticism formulates them, for a strong reading *is* the only poetic fact, the only revenge against time that endures, that is successful in canonizing one text as opposed to a rival text.<sup>1</sup>

Now a lot of what's gone down as art in the west is pretty exotic, and the role of tradition—the Western tradition imagined by someone like Harold Bloom—is something like a continuous promotion for the food processing industry, which will tell you the terrific virtues of BHA, monosodium glutamate, enriched white flour . . .<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it has always been the case that a poet's efforts to create a text which communicates a message to others has been subordinate to his desire for that text to immortalize him. Surely it has been the trend of post-Romantic literary criticism to interpret the poet's efforts as such. But it has been far more obviously the trend of such critical interpreters to seek their own immortalization. Critics, not content with being merely the interpreters of poetry, have sought to establish themselves as indispensable from the literary canon; indeed, critics such as Harold Bloom make no distinction between poetry and criticism. In his view, "a poetic 'text' . . . is not a gathering of signs on a page, but is a psychic battlefield upon which authentic forces struggle for the only victory worth winning, the divinatory triumph over oblivion" (*P&R* 2). As a critic, Bloom must fight a very complicated battle. He must, within the confines of his own "poetic text," disclose to his readers the psychic battle that is being waged by the poet in his text. In this way, Bloom, the intrepid crusader, can wage psychic war twice: once with the poet as he wrestles the poet's meaning from him, and once with himself in his own text. The latter is ultimately Bloom's sole desire—to fill the void with a divine and authentic trope to end all tropes.

Concomitant with his formulation that poetry is a psychic battlefield, Bloom views the poet's (and the critic's) creative process as a quest, whose object is not simply the aesthetic recreation of the meaning of life. Rather, Bloom views the critical quest as a search

for interpretative models [which] is a necessary obsession for the reader who would be strong, since to refuse models explicitly is only to accept other models, however unknowingly. All reading is translation, and all attempts to communicate a reading seem to court reduction, perhaps inevitably. The proper use of any critical paradigm ought to lessen the dangers of reduction, yet clearly most paradigms are, in themselves, dangerously reductive. (*P&R* 14)

Bloom's quest for interpretative models has resulted in the formulation of his own model, one which makes him the strongest reader and, as such, the strongest creator of "poetic facts." As strong as this model makes him, however, Bloom has not refrained from continually refining his model, for he lives in constant anxiety concerning the reduction of meaning. This reduction does not simply involve the reduction of Bloom's critical interpretation, but the reduction of himself. He lives in perpetual fear that his translation will be reduced, indeed usurped, by a handy new critical paradigm. In order to prevent this reduction, Bloom creates a model that allows for, in fact demands, a usurping successor, thus serving to strengthen the anxiety of influence model. No matter how many critical paradigms succeed Bloom, he remains the ultimate strong reader. He has created his successors as components of his model, and as insurance against belated death, he further creates his precursors by absorbing their models and making them his own.

Perhaps no "poetic text" could serve to establish Bloom as the ultimate reader better than Wallace Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Bloom uses Stevens' "Notes" as a blueprint for his critical theory of repression and goes to great pains to insure that we weaker readers know it. In this way, Bloom can use "Notes" as a vindication of his repression theory and of himself. Indeed, his borrowings or repressions of Stevens are at times so blatant as to be quite comical, but as Frank Lentricchia has stated in his excellent chapter on Harold Bloom, for us "to demonstrate [Bloom's] debts and anxious attacks on his predecessors is only to reinforce the point that he has been pushing all along. To say that he is unoriginal is to indulge a myth that much of contemporary theory has laid to rest."<sup>3</sup> For Bloom, as for other twentieth-century critics, no one is ever truly original. Some of us, however, are able to repress our precursors better than others, and those of us who can are stronger poets in Bloom's scheme:

A strong poet . . . must divine or invent himself, and so attempt the impossibility of *originating himself*. . . . Poetry is always at work *imagining its own origin*, or telling a persuasive lie about itself, to itself. Poetic strength ensues when such lying persuades the reader that his own origin has been reimagined by the poem. Persuasion, in a poem, is the work of rhetoric, and again Vico is the best of guides, for he convincingly related the origins of rhetoric to the origins of what he calls poetic logic, or what I would call poetic misprision. (*P&R* 7; emphasis in Bloom)

Strong poetry imagines itself and convinces the reader he (Bloom means the masculine) has also been created. If the reader is strong enough his translation becomes the poetic fact, convincing the poetry of its existence. Obviously, in Bloom's terms, poetry can not exist without the strong reader since the strong reader creates the text and its poet. Ultimately, then, Bloom's sole concern is with this strong reader and not the poetry itself, which is reduced to functioning as part of the reader's creative process. The strong poet insures the reader's creation, strength, and immortality. In Bloom's scheme, the reader becomes the poet's precursor.

To become a precursor, Bloom first chooses a poet and poem he designates as strong. Without exception, these strong poets are members of Bloom's Romantic "counter-canon," which extends from Milton to John Ashbery. (Admittedly, Ashbery periodically loses Bloom's favor, presumably because he is not strong enough.) Thus, viewed by Bloom as the most recent (and perhaps last) of the strong American Romantic poets, Wallace Stevens and his work are subjected to the precursor search phase of Bloom's criticism. In his discussion of "Notes," Bloom indicates Stevens' unacknowledged precursors (Emerson, Whitman, Shelley, and Nietzsche), but, more importantly, he fulfills his critical theory by implicitly indicating Stevens as his own unacknowledged precursor. That is, within the complicated process of Bloom's paradigm, Bloom first realizes he is created by the poem's rhetoric, then continues to find himself (and inseparable from him, his criticism) in Stevens' poem while ostensibly proving its poetic strength and sublimity. In the end, it is Bloom's triumph over oblivion, not Stevens' or that of "Notes" that is proved, which, after all, was the original intention.

Bloom's first steps toward enshrinement are evident in his statement in reference to the opening lines of "It Must Be Abstract":

the voice we hear is a half-mocking, half-oracular voice, the slightly mad professor's voice that opened *Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas*, a voice that I suspect Stevens adapted from Nietzsche, who used it with high deliberateness for similar effects.<sup>4</sup>

We weaker readers might ask to whom that half-mad voice in "Notes" belongs, and I suspect it would come as no great surprise that Bloom believes it to be himself. No other critic of "Notes" seems to hear such a voice, yet Bloom hears a voice, one that echoes his own, and serves as the precursor voice with whom he identifies, the poetic voice which creates the strong reader. Bloom adopts Nietzsche's prophetic voice, misreading the madness as persona rather than real, and his adoption can certainly be stated to be "with high deliberateness," although different in kind from Nietzsche's. As Lentricchia has observed, "Bloom has chosen to articulate his position in ways that guarantee hostile rejoinder,"<sup>5</sup> and surely some of those rejoinders have speculated as to Bloom's sanity. One is even tempted beyond the threshold of reason to speculate that Bloom enjoys, and perhaps even cultivates, such mad professor baiting. The critical and personal attacks would certainly help to establish him in the counter-canonical company of his beloved William Blake, a self-proclaimed "crazy" prophet if ever there was one. In any event, Bloom yields his "real" identity to Stevens' fiction, not because Stevens' poetry demands acquiescence, but in order for Bloom to wrest creative priority from Stevens as the originator of the voice which significantly initiates the poem.

The whole point of poetry for Bloom is just this race for priority, a priority that in reality is totally impossible. But Bloom insists that one must quest for poetic strength, and his interpretation of the three sections of "Notes" indicates that he

believes Stevens shares his conception of poetry's purpose; indeed, that Stevens received his ideas from Bloom, the precursor:

It must be abstract, because that will undo previous poets' jobs of paint.  
It must change, so as to avoid being only a single paint job of one's own,  
if that can be done. It must give pleasure, but what is pleasure for a  
strong poet, ultimately, if it is not the pleasure of priority in one's inven-  
tion? (WS:PC 174)

It is important to note that priority is more obviously Bloom's concern than Stevens'. While both are concerned that a new poet start fresh, without the dead weight of other poets' language or vision, they differ in their commitment to such a proposal. Bloom, the critic, can instruct young poets to suppress their precursors who have already named experience if they wish entrance into the canon, but it is far more difficult for Stevens to maintain such a position unequivocally. Like Bloom, who instructs young poets to write "out of the ignorance and mortal fear of the gentile giants" (*P&R* 3), Stevens instructs his ephebe (a term Bloom readily adopts, even giving its etymology in an effort to preempt Stevens) to pursue experience in ignorance of other men's:

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

Never suppose an inventing mind as source  
Of this idea nor for that mind compose  
A voluminous master folded in his fire.<sup>6</sup>

But Stevens goes farther than Bloom finds convenient. He insists that the ephebe not idolize the poetic father or think him a god. Bloom, on the other hand, has no such scruples. Not that he instructs the ephebe to do anything different from Stevens; he simply ignores the issue. Stevens has cause for concern, however. If "the death of one god is the death of all," then establishing the poet as a substitute god insures his death, and Stevens surely does not wish to pave the way to his own funeral. Stevens actually works in the opposite direction from Bloom. Whereas Bloom establishes the precursors as greater than they are, as gods whom Bloom may outtrope and become greater than, Stevens reduces his precursors to elementary school teachers. This reduction verges on, but does not become, annihilation. The reduction is only to the "first idea"; past that Stevens will not venture. Indeed, Stevens readily acknowledges that he can not even imagine in the "first idea." Bloom, of course, would define Stevens' reduction of the fathers as a defensive trope against poetic death. As he stated in reference to a journal entry of Emerson, who posited that unknown quantities are too awesome to fight, "if the new poet succumbs to a vision of the precursor as the Sublime unknown immeasurable [I might add, God-like], then the

great contention with the dead father will be lost.”<sup>7</sup> Stevens attempts to circumvent confrontation by positing the poetic fathers as genial instructors, who will educate the epebes to become good poets but not superior to themselves, since superiority means being first. Stevens knows the impossibility of the epebe ever knowing anything in the first idea, and he betrays the inevitable failure of such a project in the statement, “The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be” (CP 381). Stevens can not resist naming the sun and the poet “gold flourisher;” and he knows the epebe will never resist either, for there is no poetry without language, and that is inherited from the poetic fathers.

Language is at the heart of the problem for an epebe. He is expected to discover a thing in its first idea and use his own language to describe it, yet his own language and means of perception are based upon those of his precursors. Even Stevens can not define his concept of the first idea without relying upon the rather tired visual arts metaphor of wiping away years of dirt from a picture in order to see it as it was intended. Bloom, in an act of misprision, defines Stevens’ first idea as a reduction to “a Fate or reality supposedly beyond further reduction” (WS:PC 170). In Bloom’s terms the first idea is a kind of shrinking or disassembling rather than a cleansing, which paradoxically will lead each epebe to discover the “giant of imagination concealed within him.”<sup>8</sup> The epebe must experience a slow dissolve of personality, opening a void to be filled by the precursor poet, with whom the epebe is in constant struggle to simultaneously discover and repress within his psyche.

Just as Bloom played with Stevens’ first idea, he plays with the “giant of the weather;” seeing it as a metaphor for his own precursor giant (or gentile giant appropriated from Vico). Stevens’ “giant of the weather” and “major man” become literally and figuratively *manifestations* of supreme fiction for Bloom:

Stevens turns to the idea of the weather precisely as the religious man turns to the idea of God, which is to say that for him the weather is not just a trope for the supreme fiction but is itself as much of that fiction as poetry is or can be. It may be that the world does not present itself as a poem everyday, but still poetry and *materia poetica* are the same thing, every day, and for Stevens the *prime materia poetica* is the weather. (WS:PC 186)

Bloom finds in nature the stuff of poetry, and this will lead him to link Stevens with the American Transcendentalists and to ensconce him firmly in the “back-to-natureness” of the Romantic Tradition. The Romantic ideal of a union between poet and natural world is evident throughout Bloom’s reading of Stevens’ “giant of the weather” trope, who is ultimately God, the Father-Poet, maker of all things sublime, especially criticism on Romantic Poetry.

If the weather is the essence of the supreme fiction, then its signs of communication are the clouds which have come out of “a muddy centre.” These clouds somehow communicate to us the knowledge “that we live in a place / That is not

our own and, much more, not ourselves" (CP 383). And, for Stevens, "it is from this the poem springs." The knowledge that we live in a world not of our making seems to push the poet to want to create some world over which he has control, and in his poetry he can create both the world and the self that will occupy it. This is obviously the foundation of Bloom's own theory of creative process. Upon it he lavishes a Freudian father/son power struggle, the psychic battle between male generations which sparks invention and insures human progress. (Bloom's is obviously a very male-oriented theory concerning an aesthetic creative process dominated by a single and presumably self-sufficient sex. Some might counter this patriarchal trend in criticism, in which Bloom's voice is but one of many, with a cry of "womb-envy!" but I'll repress them from inappropriately doing so here.)

All of this wonderfully aesthetic human progress is in counterpoint to the dreaded "muddy centre." Man had nothing to do with creating this world; in fact, he was not even present until the sixth day according to Genesis. Such anxiety at being preempted and excluded from the greatest creative act in western mythology, evidently prompts man to overcome his loss by imposing himself and his orderly fiction upon the reality of the first idea, which itself poses a problem as it is "an imagined thing" also (CP 387). Man's belief in the immutability of his fiction is most concretely evident in his poetic texts; there he is the ultimate authority. As Bloom states, "there is no textual authority without an act of imposition, a declaration of property that is made figuratively rather than properly or literally" (P&R 6). It is authority, the voice that can shrivel the poet precursor's influence in the ephebe's mind, that the young poet yearns for. And he may only achieve it by an impudent act of will, an act reminiscent of Prometheus' theft of fire or of Satan's rebellion against God. Satan (like the male poet) believes throughout his text—*Paradise Lost*—in his self-sufficiency, that he is the ultimate authority.

Unlike Bloom, who readily adopts the satanic persona of impudent will, Stevens constantly retreats from such resolute impositions of power. He would prefer that creation be natural, that is, accidental rather than imposed. For him, poetry is a kind of music comprised of "not balances / That we achieve but balances that happen, / As a man and woman meet and love forthwith" (CP 386). The ordinariness of such a meeting prompts Bloom to contend that the average man is capable of achieving immortality if he can follow the muse in a quest for the first idea. But the ordinary person does not quest. If he discovers the first idea it is because he has remained a passive receptacle of nature, a vessel into which nature pours beauty, as opposed to the strong poet who actively exercises his will. We can not, according to Stevens, establish the everyday person as "major man," for "the MacCullough is MacCullough. / It does not follow that major man is man" (CP 387). Bloom characteristically ignores this qualifying by Stevens, preferring a reading that is more "heroic." Thus he maintains an interpretation of Stevens' early lines in canto viii, stating "even the MacCullough may be transformed into a figure of the youth as virile poet, the 'beau linguist' conceived as a young god . . ." But it is not as a young god that Stevens wants the ephebe to

think of himself. He has earlier made it quite clear that the gods are dead and the poet cannot hope to replace them. "Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named" (CP 381). And if the dead god is not sufficient reminder, Stevens quickly presents a comical figure dressed "in his old coat, / His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town, / Looking for what was, where it used to be" (CP 389). The god Phoebus has been reduced to the status of an urban vent person.

Similarly, the abstraction of the idea of man, the "major man," is neither heroic nor authoritative by itself. Stevens obviously deflates the major man from his elitist perch, stating "The major abstraction is the communal, / The inanimate, difficult visage" (CP 388). To think that Stevens might be democratizing his hero is too much for Bloom, who maintains that the major man "is *celebrated* at first as an abstraction and then as a Chaplinesque being presented to the ephebe as a reduced idea of man who must be made, indeed confected, into the ultimate elegance of the imagined hero" (WS:PC 188, emphasis mine). Bloom insists upon a heroic revision, so much so that the "major abstraction" becomes a stand-in or metalepsis for the weather that, as "poetica materia," Bloom had earlier stated was inseparable from the poetic text. The abstraction of man, as trope for the "muddy centre," becomes that which stimulates the poetic imagination. However, Stevens is careful to instruct his ephebe not to find his inspirational abstracted self a consolation or purification—a cleansing reminiscent of the first idea (and Christ's Resurrection). The abstraction of man can not be the first idea, nor can he be a hero; he must be *plainly* proposed.

This is directly at odds with Bloom's misprision. Bloom would rather a hero be imagined since his ephebe is as much a potentially strong reader as he is a poet. Bloom's ephebe must be a strong reader of Stevens before he can hope to create his own poetry. This is not a two-step process, however; the strong reader creates *as* he reads, not afterward. This simultaneity is, according to Bloom:

a rhetorical challenge for Stevens that he imposes upon us, as readers, . . . the necessity for finishing his poem, *It Must Be Abstract*, by making our own transumptive trope, by abstracting from this tramp figure, at once Whitmanian and Chaplinesque, "the final elegance." To "propound" is to "propose," and it is our burden to put our own version of major man forward for consideration. (WS:PC 190-91)

What a wonderful challenge for our intrepid critic in his knightly quest for immortality. Not only is it his duty to translate poetic texts for us MacCulloughs (at great personal risk due to the "inevitable reductiveness"), but he must shoulder the Kiplingesque burden of composition as well. He must trope against Stevens' rhetorical imposition.

The second section of poems, "It Must Change," is viewed by Bloom as "more exuberant than *It Must Be Abstract*, reflecting Stevens' momentary but profound relief at being almost free of reductiveness," which Bloom views as the inevitable result of improperly absorbing un-Romantic philosophical influences (WS:PC

191). Bloom believes that philosophers like Bergson and William James are rather too alien to Stevens' real self, for "when he is most himself, his vision of change is Lucretian and Shelleyan, as in the final canto of *It Must Change*" (*WS:PC* 191). If we may misprision Bloom, we might translate this statement as a fear that *he* is at times too apt to equate change or flux with reduction, and to counterbalance the fear, Bloom reasserts the Shelleyan ideal, whose *Ode to the West Wind* is undoubtedly echoed in Stevens. But the Shelleyan influence is not nearly as important as Bloom's interpretation of it; for him, poems "are defensive processes in constant change, which is to say that poems themselves are acts of reading" (*P&R* 26). Since the primary position is as reader, not as poet, it is for the reader's sake that Bloom fears reduction, reduction the reader himself would initiate. He must then shift the meaning of change to one of exchange between a reader and poet. This insures an on-going debate between reader and text and helps ward off Bloom's fears of self-annihilation.

Stevens' considerations of change are wholly different from Bloom's. In the first four cantos, Stevens' primary focus is upon natural changes only, particularly those exemplified by the seasons. But Stevens recognizes that while there are changes within cycles, the cycles themselves do not change irreversibly or without pattern; in fact, they merely repeat:

It means the distaste we feel for this withered scene

Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,  
It is a repetition.

(*CP* 390)

Inevitable within natural cycles is that change toward death. Yet, following winter, there is the reassuring change toward spring, toward beginning, and this leads Stevens to consider in canto iv the possibilities of immortality. As Joseph Riddel has stated:

Stevens must nonetheless arbitrate man's role in nature. For if man cannot survive beyond nature and change, neither can he live fully within change. To this end, canto four delivers a tentative proposition, which imposes an aesthetic order on change: that is, change as it is known and experienced by a self, not change as an inherent law of nature.<sup>10</sup>

Like Bloom, Joseph Riddel views Stevens' trope of change as an imposition rather than as a discovery. This is perhaps as much due to Riddel's underlying patriarchal assumption in reading "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another, as a man depends / On a woman." Riddel misprisions imposition for dependence as the origin of change. The movement is not one of imposition but of companionable union: "my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight." Stevens' is not the aesthetics of rape or even of caveman sexual aggression. Even at its least "companionable," Stevens' trope is not venge-

ful as much as it is deflective, in the sense that death is redirected away from the self by the text's defensive stance against time.

Caught as we are in Stevens' artificially ordered text, he returns us to a contemplation of the aesthetic, which naturally enough means his own poem. In a letter to Hi Simons he explained canto ii of "It Must Change":

We cannot ignore or obliterate death, yet we do not live in memory. Life is always new; it is always beginning. The fiction is part of this beginning.<sup>11</sup>

In a Bloomian sense, Stevens is saying that we create fictions, new beginnings, as defenses against death and against those precursors who live in our memories, sometimes more vibrantly than we do in life. Beginning always means change—away from death and memory—toward poetic originality. Yet there is a problem with moving away from memory, for it moves us away from the only receptacle of our immortality: another's memory. The text seems, then, to serve as a way-station in anticipation of the reader's reception of its discourse.

Perhaps it was an understanding of this dilemma between memory and immortality which prompted Stevens in canto vi to lead "directly to an animated rejection of the myth of immortality in a poem that mocks even as it celebrates things of this world. It mocks as it were the insistence of things of this world—as well as selves—to *be* beyond change: to be *bethoued*."<sup>12</sup> Yet Stevens' purpose is not entirely mockery of self-sufficiency; he also intends for the reader to realize the fundamental and paradoxical vitality in the chorus of birdsong. The insistence of the bird's cries becomes a monotonous sound but one that is united in its intention:

In the face of death life asserts itself. Perhaps it makes an image out of the force with which it struggles to survive. Bethou is intended to be heard; it and ké-ké, which is inimical, are opposing sounds. Bethou is the spirit's own seduction. (L 438)

Always in Stevens there is an opposing change, a counterpoint that keeps everything, both natural and aesthetic, in perpetual dialectic motion. Perhaps Stevens recognizes that it is the endless motion, the constant inconstancy, that is indeed immortal.

Bloom, naturally, reads canto vi as Stevens' fear of losing his poetic voice, of being absorbed "into the natural cycle of the language that would transcend cycle" (WS:PC 196). Bloom is missing the greater concern here, however. Stevens is not simply afraid his language will be unable to transcend the ordinary; he is afraid his voice, however poetic, will go unheard. With so many yearning to create themselves in their cries of "bethou me," Stevens disassociates himself from them just as he did the "voluminous master" of "It Must Be Abstract":

Bethou him, you  
And you, bethou him and bethou. It is  
A sound like any other. It will end.

(CP 394)

He wants the ephebe to be quite clear he is not like all the others. And it is here that Bloom most identifies with Stevens. He wants his readers to know he is not like all the other critics, that he refuses to allow his voice to be drowned by theirs, even if it means he must somewhat bitterly pronounce that their voices will end because they are indistinguishable. As Lentricchia has noted, Bloom believes that New Criticism and Deconstruction will end, and he will be the resurrecting spring. Stevens' view of change also posits that things do not simply end without being replaced, so it is rather odd that he seemingly offers no new beginning to his ephebe. The lesson is an implicit and aesthetic one, however. When poetry is part of beginning, the resumption of Stevens' text is the indication that his voice is not like all the others, which will end abruptly. His voice will resume, even if it is only a dim echo of his First Voice.

The distinction between natural and aesthetic change is delineated by Stevens in canto x. Natural change just happens, but aesthetic change is an act of the will, an imposition of the self through poetry:

The west wind was the music, the motion, the force  
To which the swans curveted, a will to change,  
A will to make iris frettings on the blank.

There was a will to change, a necessitous  
And present way, a presentation, a kind  
Of volatile world, too constant to be denied . . .

(CP 397)

Stevens determines that "the casual is not enough," that we must control change, indeed, insure change so that immortality is assured. All changes in the world we make reflect ourselves, and our poetry becomes part of that change.

Stevens' earlier considerations of natural (and passive) cycles seem to be replaced by his apparent belief in the triumph of the will over chaos, which Bloom formulates as a standard component of his critical theory:

The strong word and stance issue only from a strict will, a will that dares the error of reading all of reality as a text, and all prior texts as openings for its own totalizing and unique interpretations. Strong poets present themselves as looking for truth *in the world*, searching in reality and in tradition, but such a stance, as Nietzsche said remains under the mastery of desire, of instinctual drives. So, in effect, the strong poet wants pleasure not truth; he wants what Nietzsche named as "the belief in truth and the pleasurable effects of this belief." (*P&R* 2)

This statement of Bloom's in *Poetry and Repression* could not be more illustrative of Bloom's own will. He has consistently used Stevens' "Notes" to prove the value of his own critical interpretations (rather than the other way around), and just as Stevens is on the verge of moving to "It Must Give Pleasure," Bloom has anticipated him through his self-celebrated repression theory by stating "a strong poet wants pleasure not truth." Pleasure of critical self-fulfillment is also the end of such strength—in both senses.

If Bloom identifies with the mad-professor voice of "It Must Be Abstract" it should come as no surprise that he also identifies with the "heroic" Canon Aspirin, who is, according to Bloom, on a "quest toward an integration of all reality, fact and thought together."<sup>13</sup> Surely Bloom is on no less a quest but to link all fact and fiction in his critical reality. As in the beginning cantos of "It Must Change," in which Stevens intimates the desire for change brings about change, he proposes in canto ii of "It Must Give Pleasure" that a movement toward something perceptually becomes that which is the object of the pursuit:

One of the approaches to fiction is by way of its opposite: reality, the truth, the thing observed, the purity of the eye. The more exquisite the thing seen, the more exquisite the thing unseen. Eventually there is a state at which any approach becomes the actual observation of the thing approached. (L 444)

Stevens' answer to Yeats's question, "How can we know the dancer from the dance," is that we cannot: art and perception (inseparable from the perceiver) are one.

This idea that "The partaker partakes of that which changes him" (CP 392) is fully illustrated by Bloom's approach to Stevens' fiction, which is intended to reveal his fiction to be even more splendid through Bloom's unerring vision. The more sublime and strong a poet Stevens is, the more sublime and strong Bloom until the inevitable merger where one cannot tell the poet from the critic. Thus, Bloom states "that the Canon Aspirin is the High Romantic Poet, Stevens' heroic precursor, whom Stevens hopes to surpass since Stevens has learned that the composite precursor is not so easily reduced or dismissed."<sup>14</sup> But it is actually Bloom who hopes to surpass the Canon while wearing his precursor guise of Emerson the sublime prophet or Shelley the magnificent critic or even as his personal nemesis, T.S. Eliot. Without doubt the most interesting disguise is one which is betrayed by the Canon's great difficulty in restraining himself from imposing "orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do" (CP 403). In this unnatural imposition that nature is ironically symbolic of, no literary reference could be more pointed or more attractive to Bloom than Milton's Satan.

In a wonderfully (anti)heroic move, Satan fulfills his Freudian ephebe role and attempts the overthrow of his precursor, God. Satan fails in his attempt largely because he refuses to acknowledge he is not self-sufficient, but maintains a strong belief in the illusion of his self-creation throughout *Paradise Lost*. But Satan's failure is not of consequence to Bloom; if anything it is Bloom's point that an ephebe is doomed to failure. What Bloom finds most admirable is that Satan attempted

quite nobly the impossible. So admirable does he find such action that he emulates Satan in his attempt to surpass his own precursors. As Lentricchia has observed, Bloom continues to fight “against the New Critical precursors in America and the new arrivals from the continent . . . [and] with unfortunately misleading emphasis, to attempt to clear space for himself in order to create his critical identity out of nothing.”<sup>15</sup> Out of the chaos, out of the nothingness of what we do not know, Bloom intends to impose creation of himself, so he imposes his self onto Stevens’ text as Satan did in Eden or God “in the wide womb of uncreated night.” In identifying himself with Satan/God, Bloom is participating in a Revenge Tragedy disguised as a Family Romance. God and Satan vengefully trope against one another, until Christ, as the agent of God’s will, has the last redemptive trope. The trope war in *Paradise Lost* serves as the model for Bloom’s vengeful troping against the New Critics and Post-Structuralists, with Bloom finally assuming the persona of Christ, prophet and God’s agent, as the trope of spring—the new critical beginning. These *Paradise Lost* trope echoes are, I think, intentional. Bloom is so blatantly enamored of Milton’s text (as the definitive trope on God’s Word), that he even suggests Stevens is “a kind of minor Milton of our century” (*Map* 191).

Unlike Bloom, Stevens seems to have some trouble with his own identification with the satanic Canon, and he disassociates himself in canto vii with others as he has done previously. His advocacy of discovery over imposition is far more pronounced in this section than in “It Must Change,” but still he must struggle with his desire to impose until finally he imposes a restraint on himself by forcing the repression of his need to impose. He tells his alter-ego, Angel, to “Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound” (*CP* 404). It is unclear, however, whether that sound is made by some ethereal being, the music of the spheres, or by Stevens’ poetry. Is Stevens lapsing to a vision of the world with which Alexander Pope would concur: “God, in the nature of each being, founds / Its proper bliss, and sets its proper bounds,”<sup>16</sup> or is he reasserting the modern poet’s God-like stance with the concomitant anxiety that the death of one God is the death of all? Clearly this is ambiguous enough that the following canto could begin with “What am I to believe?” What Stevens finally relies upon is his ability to create poetic texts and his power to create himself.

In the penultimate stanza of canto viii Stevens writes:

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

(*CP* 405)

Bloom misreads the above canto as evidence that Stevens is opting for self-assertion, in spite of Stevens’ clear preference in canto vii for discovery:

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

It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible.

(CP 404)

Bloom indicates that Stevens overcomes such a possibility in canto viii: "Stevens says 'I have not but I am,' because he does not receive, but appropriates for himself through mastering the repetition of his own never-ending meditations upon self. Stevens, the better poet, but the much less transcendent consciousness, is less persuasive [than Emerson] in proclaiming an ultimate Self-Reliance" (*Map* 172). While I do not agree that Stevens' overriding philosophical stance is one of appropriation rather than reception, Bloom's realization that Stevens is not persuasively Self-Reliant is accurate. While Stevens is obviously stating the definitive self-creative act—I am—he cannot truly believe in it. The vacillation that has been in evidence throughout "Notes" is present again in the final stanza where Stevens backs away from such an egotistical, even awesomely solipsistic stance, to state that such an act is an illusion. We only populate external reality with reflections of ourselves that grow ever more dim with each self-fulfillment. The danger here is that self-fulfillment leads ultimately to self-annihilation, and Stevens, at least, is not convinced that death leads to poetic immortality. The "little deaths" of Cinderella's sexual self-sufficiency lead not to immortality for Stevens but to sterility. Each succeeding self-creative act produces a dimmer vision of self, until the vision disappears and with it its original. Nothing is left, and no creation is possible. Bloom believes with Milton that the Precursor Poet, God, can state "I am who fill / Infinitude, nor vacuous the space. / Though I uncircumscribd myself retire, / And put not forth my goodness, which is free . . . what I will is Fate" (*PL* VII 168-73). Stevens, however, is fearful that such withdrawal, if at all possible, is denied the successors of the Primary Poet. His attempts at Self-Reliance would be as vain as Satan's.

Unlike Stevens, Bloom does not have the attack of conscience at self-creation (or, crudely, at the intellectual masturbation in which Satan, for one, indulges, producing Sin from his forehead). Although Bloom realizes Stevens disengages himself from the Canon Aspirin, he states it is to triumph over the Canon, troping him into oblivion and succeeding the Canon's attempts to harness reality:

Stevens will abstract himself from the Canon Aspirin, in order to proclaim his own momentary incarnation of a supreme fiction, which will turn out not to be poetry or a poem but, as in Emerson and Whitman (and Wordsworth), to be a poet, to be a fiction of the self, or the poetic self as a transumption, an audacious trope undoing all previous tropes. (WS:PC 206)

The "audacious trope" here is Bloom's not Stevens'. Bloom creatively misreads Stevens' defensive movement away from solitary pleasure "as the time of having made a poem, seen it fail, and only *then* stepping back from it and proclaiming one's greater freedom and satisfaction, greater than those of the fiction one has made" (WS:PC 215). Stevens' movement is not toward self-creation but *away* from such a self-consuming trope. Even Bloom assents that "no poet, *as poet*, can wish to die, for that negates poethood." So Bloom redefines death, placing it not in a timeless vacuous space, but in the space of beginnings:

If death ultimately represents the earlier state of things, then it also represents the earlier state of meaning, or pure anteriority; that is to say repetition of the literal, or literal meaning. Death is therefore a kind of literal meaning, or from the standpoint of poetry, *literal meaning is a kind of death. Defenses can be said to trope against death, rather in the same sense that tropes can be said to defend against literal meaning, which is the antithetical formula for which we have been questing.* (Map 91; emphasis in Bloom)

In other words, created *ex nihilo* we are returned to nothing by death and poetry, the bastion of defensive tropes, which serves to fill a small void with textual evidence of existence. Bloom would insist that, however small the textual space, the poet must preempt others to gain admission, must reduce all other poets to a more literal level by transuming their language.

Bloom's misprision of Stevens' irony is not limited to canto viii but can also be seen in his translation of canto x in which he states that Stevens is purposely denying his real muse by presenting us with an earthy replica. Bloom denies Stevens his right to a less than ethereal muse because he senses that such a muse could not inspire "heroic" poetry, and if this is so, Bloom has been wasting his time with Stevens. Bloom believes that Stevens' impostor muse is:

a richly earned positive moment which is essentially Nietzschean, recognizing as it does that the pleasure of art ensues from a willing error, a more than rational distortion, an evasion of the truth, because the truth either is or becomes dead. (WS:PC 217)

Stevens' "fat girl" is considerably less an evasion than she is the logical manifestation of Stevens' musings in canto ix. There he once again attempts to find a place where art will not seem such an imposition on nature. Only if he reverts to his definition of change as repetition can Stevens succeed, so he asserts that the ability to change through repetition must be enough to give pleasure. Self-creation is perhaps too much to ask:

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:  
One of the vast repetitions final in  
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,  
Until merely going round is a final good . . .

So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,  
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,  
But he that of repetition is most master.

(CP 405-06)

Tentatively, Stevens can suggest a compromise, a half-man/half-hero hybrid that is the poet who recognizes natural change, who does not impose himself in vengeance but seeks to imitate the primary order in an attempt to become part of that order.

The "going round and round" is as much a reference to the earth's rotation as to the seasonal changes Stevens has already considered. His earthy muse is a poetic creation "familiar yet an aberration," for she is not the Urania of Milton, nor the muse of the composite Romantic poets, nor even Emerson's Nature. Stevens relies on a homely inspiration because he is aware that those distant Muses can not serve to inspire one so belated. [Bloom, on the other hand, imagines so many voices buzzing in his ear that the chorus he hears is always "bethou him, you." That "bethou is the spirit's own seduction" could be considered Bloom's emblem should by now be obvious.] He also relies upon a sense of the balance of opposites that so naturally creates change. The tree, as a symbol of permanence, and the "moving contour" of perpetual motion serve as representatives from nature of the unity symbolized by the coupling of man and woman in canto iv of "It Must Change." Knowing that such a change is imminent he wishes to step in as its creator, to "name you flatly, waste no words, / Check your evasions, hold you to yourself" (CP 406). Despite himself, he sees his earthy muse as supernatural, and quickly she becomes "the more than rational distortion, / The fiction that results from feeling" (CP 406). He again imposes himself in order to make her exist as change through repetition, but he knows he can do this only in his text. (We should be aware, too, of the pun in naming flatly the earth.) She will be caught in his highly orchestrated and cyclical poem rotating only when read. The muse will become the text, and Stevens will engender her as he generates his poem. He will be self-sufficient (at least, muse-less) in the end.

I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.  
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

(CP 407)

Perhaps Bloom is correct in asserting that "Emerson . . . would have found in Stevens what he had once found in Whitman: a rightful heir of the American quest for Self-Reliance founded upon a complete Self-Knowledge" (*Map* 174), but

it is not the androgynous completeness of Whitman that Bloom believes Stevens incorporates, but the sense of self-possession represented by the willful act against the broken vessel of the text.

By imitating what he perceives as the natural repetitions of change, Stevens can at least establish himself as the man-hero poet, one who is not larger than life like the "voluminous masters" but one who is sufficiently masterful as to make the ephebe's attempt to surpass him most difficult. Bloom believes Stevens to be masterful enough to have rediscovered the American Sublime, and of course, Bloom's trope of Stevens' "Notes" establishes him in the same company. As the Sublime Critic, Bloom:

can hope to teach, whether to the common reader or to the poet, a series of stronger modes of substitution. Substitution in this sense, is a mode of creation-through-catastrophe. The vessels or fixed forms break in every act of reading or of writing, but *how* they break is to a considerable extent in the power of each reader and of each writer. (*P&R* 270)

How they break for Bloom is easier and easier, and in their places he establishes his own textual vessel until, finally, he creates not only the text of "Notes" but its creator as well. This is Bloom's self-creational act, to supplant the precursor and establish himself in his wake. Ultimately, Bloom substitutes himself in an energetic trope as a bid for immortality.

Yet as Bloom knows very well, he has set himself in a position to be outtropped by some future ephebe:

There is an unhappy irony, clearly, in the situation of the belated strong poet, since as much as in any poet ever, the spirit in him insists upon priority and autonomy, yet the text he produces is condemned to offer itself for interpretation as being already an interpretation of other interpretations, rather than as what it asserts itself to be, an interpretation of life. No illusion about his status and function is more difficult to shed, as I have learned through being denounced by virtually every poet I meet. (*P&R* 269-70)

Perhaps it is by those denunciations that Bloom hopes to remain untrodden. Lentricchia has expressed some puzzlement at Bloom's insistence on calling more attention to himself through his outlandish rhetoric than to his theories, which warrant some serious thought. Perhaps if his rhetoric is abrasive enough, Bloom can insure a constant onslaught of other critics trying to outtrope him, for Bloom must know that his texts must be substituted for if his theory is to have any validity. If it were to stand forever, unchallenged by a critical ephebe, it would surely prove worthless. Bloom's text must be substituted for, and his hysterical realization that this is true produces both anxiety and pleasure. He has predicted, even demanded, his own substitution and in imitating the natural cycle of change

through repetitive substitution as Stevens does, Bloom has insured his immortal place in the critical canon.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 6. Further references will be cited in the text as *PER*.

<sup>2</sup>David Antin letter to William Spanos, Jan. 1, 1975, in "David Antin: A Correspondence with the Editors, William V. Spanos and Robert Kroetsch," *Boundary 2*, 3 (1974-75), pp. 645-46.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 343.

<sup>4</sup>Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 177. Further references will be cited in the text as *WS:PC*.

<sup>5</sup>Lentricchia, p. 343.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), pp. 380-81. Further references will be cited in the text as *CP*.

<sup>7</sup>Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 163. Further references will be cited in the text as *Map*.

<sup>8</sup>Harold Bloom, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup>Bloom, "A Commentary," p. 81.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 175.

<sup>11</sup>Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 434. Further references will be cited in the text as *L*.

<sup>12</sup>Riddel, p. 176.

<sup>13</sup>Bloom, "A Commentary," p. 92.

<sup>14</sup>Bloom, "A Commentary," p. 92.

<sup>15</sup>Lentricchia, p. 326.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander Pope, *An Essay On Man: Epistle III*, in *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 141.

## Poems

### The Twins

"He always stayed longer in the Klee Gallery"  
—Peter Brazeau

Wallace Stevens: Poet's poet,  
Born 1879.  
"He really did like Klee very much."

Paul Klee: Painter's painter,  
Born 1879.  
He couldn't have known Stevens.

*Er sprach kein Englisch.*

Yet he must've known him  
In some "August Imagination."  
How else explain the parallel?

"The poet mumbles and the painter sees"  
Each in his own way  
The same idea.  
1919

Stevens writes "Life is Motion."  
Klee agrees. He paints "Up, Away and Out."  
1920

A dry year for Stevens.  
Klee sends "A Message of the Air Spirit."  
1921

Stevens recovers; consults "The Doctor of Geneva."  
Klee waits. He paints "Dr. Bartolo."  
1922

Stevens complains: Such "A High-toned Old Christian  
Woman!"  
Klee nods: I'll paint her a "Morality Wagon."

1923

Paul! Look! "Two Figures in Dense Violet Light."  
No matter, Wally. They only need  
"Intensification of Color from the Static to the Dynamic."

1934

The years pass.  
Wallace dreams of an "Evening without Angels."  
Paul hears him.  
Here, take this "Angel in the Making."

1938

"Poetry is a Destructive Force" warns Stevens.  
Not if you paint "A Light and Dry Poem" grins Klee.

1939

Klee falls ill. He paints a message:  
Before it's too late—please write  
An "Omphalo-Centric Lecture."

1940

Stevens obliges in  
"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas."  
Klee dies.

*Es war nicht nötig, Englisch zu verstehen.*

Carl Djerassi  
Department of Chemistry  
Stanford University

## The Ming Dynasty of Ice Cream

If you ever want to become  
A dandelion or a moose  
In Maine the way an amoeba

Became Bertrand Russell,  
Wallace Stevens said,  
That would be a *Divine*

*Comedy* or a *No Name*  
*Jive* even a German  
Soldier standing frozen

In front of the gates of Moscow  
Could appreciate  
As well as the Chinese

Who admired the Sistine  
Chapel with which Marco  
Polo had attracted

Their attention while  
The sculpted palace guard  
Standing buried in the earth

Ensured the eternal life  
Of the Emperors of the Ming  
Dynasty of Ice Cream.

Norman Macleod  
Pembroke State University

## Reviews

### **Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self.**

By Milton J. Bates. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Wallace Stevens is a particularly difficult subject for biography. At first glance, his voluminous archive would seem to provide sufficient material for one of the large-scale lives to which we have grown accustomed with the biographies of Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett, *et. al.* However, after going through the 7,000 items in the Huntington Library collection, the main Stevens archive, one is acutely aware of how many chapters in Stevens' life are missing. Though he was one of the great letter writers among twentieth century American poets, Stevens, unlike many of these writers, never had a confidant during his mature years to whom he unburdened himself on paper, so it is particularly difficult to get an insiders' view of his day-to-day existence during his most creative years in Connecticut: his altering domestic life, the satisfactions and irritations of life at the office, or a running account of his work on poems and essays. Indeed, it is precisely the paucity of working manuscripts in the various Stevens archives that makes it as difficult to develop the biography of most of his work as it does to trace the daily life of the poet-businessman-husband. There are at least two young scholars who are at work on standard lives of this poet, and one will be keenly interested in the strategies they use to fill in the considerable blanks in Stevens' career, such as the crucial period from 1924 through the early 1930s when he not only stopped writing poetry but also virtually stopped his personal correspondence as well.

Facing the serious gaps in the Stevens papers, a biographer must devise strategies for working successfully within these limitations. Such practical problems soon confront a Stevens biographer with theoretical issues about the genre of biography itself. If the Stevens data does not lend itself to the continuous, novelistic narrative we have grown accustomed to, it makes one reconsider the dominance of this format itself. One becomes aware that modern biography is probably the most conservative genre of the twentieth century. It is surely an irony of our literary era that some of its most experimental writers have had their lives told in the most traditional of 19th century forms, in accounts by omniscient narrators who weave a seamless web from birth to death. In Stevens' case, oral history has recently provided one alternative to this traditional format. It is one of the strategies which brings the genre of biography in line with twentieth century aesthetics, giving us multiple viewpoints as a valid alternative to the myth of the omniscient narrator, while making the reader an active participant in creating a credible fiction of Wallace Stevens.

In *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*, Milton J. Bates has employed yet another strategy for discussing Stevens' personal and artistic life, one which proves highly illuminating. In eight informative and gracefully written chapters, Bates charts Stevens' biography as a poet by tracing the various personae Stevens adopted under the pressure of circumstance and then discarded over the course of his career. Bates examines in great detail the Harvardian, the Lover, the Burgher-Fop-Clown, the Pure Poet, Medium Man, and the Paysan, among other figures. Most of these have been under discussion for many years; Bates has absorbed this criticism and acknowledges his indebtedness to it. His significant contribution to the discussion is based, in part, on a thorough examination of the unpublished material in the various Stevens archives around the country, applying his findings with sophistication and tact as he discusses the poet's evolution.

A good example of how much Bates has added to our understanding of Stevens' personal and poetic life by his biographical method is to be found in his discussion of the character of the Paysan Stevens considers and, at times, assumes in his 1940s poetry. Who would have imagined in the 1920s that the dandy of *Harmonium* would become a Pennsylvania peasant, so to speak, late in his career. Having gone through the more than 2,500 genealogical items in Stevens' archive, Bates develops a subtle argument which shows how this persona strongly influenced Stevens' late sense of self, his aesthetic, and his judgment of fellow artists, as two quotations from *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* will suggest.

[Stevens] came to regard himself as both physically and spiritually the product of his ancestry. He attributed his robust physical constitution to the Barcalows and Hogelands, who had "built up" the weaker Stevens line . . . Along with physique and temperament Stevens believed that he had inherited certain of his poetic preoccupations. His "reality-imagination complex" was, he asserted in 1953, uniquely his own (L 792). But it was also a latter-day version of complementary instincts which had informed his ancestors' lives—their belief in God and their attachment to the soil.

Stevens saw no reason to isolate any moment in the imagination-reality cycle and cling to it alone . . . Especially during the fall and winter of 1948-49, however, he began to feel that modern art and literature had tipped the scale toward imagination . . . By the late forties, he was looking to artists like Tal Coat to redress the balance in favor of realism . . . For Stevens, the Venetian glass dish [in the Tal Coat oil Stevens had recently purchased] became the "angel" so neglected by the fashionable or merely aesthetic artists of his day: reality . . . It pleased Stevens to think that Coat's still life, so full of the solidity, burliness, and aggressiveness he [now] valued was the work of a Breton peasant (L 654). The more he learned about the Pennsylvania farmers and craftsmen in his own past, the more he sought the trademark of the peasant in other writers' work, as a token of authenticity.

Perhaps one can fully appreciate Bates' achievement in this chapter (one of four previously published in journals) only if one has gone through the genealogical morass at The Huntington Library. While the Stevens collection there is a model for literary archives, the genealogical material seems to have overwhelmed even the Huntington's exemplary catalogers, who finally simply stuffed this material into boxes headed "Zeller-Stevens Family," etc.

This seminal chapter exemplifies Bates' impeccable scholarship and subtle biographical speculations, though one is tempted to query his readings of some of the genealogical poetry. There is a very real split between Stevens' mood as a genealogist tracking down his ancestors and his mood as a family poet meditating on his ancestors' fate. Stevens the genealogist is almost always exhilarated and up-beat when he is piecing together the puzzle of his past, as in his 1944 remark to his nephew-in-law John Sauer that "Genealogy has become a sort of substitute for the reading of detective stories." The mood of Stevens the poet, however, is in stark contrast. When he turns to his ancestry, he frequently broods on how quickly all memory of his forebears has been obliterated. The tone of his genealogical poems is most often bleak, indeed, as he considers his own fu-

ture in his ancestors' fate. At times, Bates' explications seem a bit tone deaf in this regard, as in his discussion of "Dutch Graves in Bucks County":

modern armies go about their noisy business with little regard for battles fought long ago by the soldiers buried in Bucks County, most likely in the Dutch cemetery at Feasterville. Because freedom is "like a man who kills himself / Each night" and cannot be passed from one generation to the next, the Dutchmen must "Know that the past is not part of the present." But since each generation is involved in the same quest for freedom, Stevens can address these old soldiers as "semblables" and conclude that the modern "divergence" from the past is not so dramatic as to prevent their understanding the present.

This hardly seems to communicate either the lacerating emotional character of the poem or Stevens' desperate mood in this postcard from the volcano.

*Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* should prove to be the last word on many phases of Stevens' poetic development for some time to come. Bates is particularly good, for example, on the relationship between the young Stevens and his audience. Chapter Two, one of the most subtle and rewarding in the book, examines the various personae Stevens assumed in the letters and poems with which he courted his future wife. In his third chapter, Bates discusses how this audience of one expanded into Stevens' New York literary circle of the 1910s, which encouraged him, for instance, in the role of the dandy he tried out successfully in such poems as "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" and "Tea." Indeed, members of this Arensberg circle gave Stevens the greatest encouragement a young poet could get as they solicited his poems for their little magazines. (In this regard, Bates' chapter complements Glen MacLeod's recent monograph on Stevens' New York circle, *Wallace Stevens and Company*.)

While the temper of Stevens' audience, of course, changed, it continued to have a determining influence on him as a mature poet in subtle ways. One wishes Bates had kept this issue in mind when dealing with Stevens' late years as well. A work from the poet's final period suggests how important audience was up to the end of Stevens' career. In the fall of 1952, Stevens' late masterpiece, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," was published in *The Hudson Review*; its first appearance in this journal, however, has obscured the fact that it was written with a particular audience in mind. In the spring of 1952, Stevens had read at Harvard and, as unpublished letters show, had written this poem for that occasion. Recognizing the original audience Stevens had in mind when he composed the work helps to recover an historical sense of "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" as initially something of a coterie poem: a piece composed for a Harvard audience by a Harvard alumnus about a Harvard worthy. At its debut, at least, Stevens intended to admit a new generation of Harvard students to Santayana's room and to translate for them the final lessons this Harvard eminence had to teach by his deathbed example.

As he begins *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*, Bates is understandably wary about taking a biographical approach to Stevens' poetic development in the present critical climate. As he states in his preface, he intends to "suggest how one poet transcended biography by transforming it into fables of identity." However, Bates immediately—and wisely—adds that Stevens was not a creator "*ex nihilo*: at each phase of his career, he had perforce to shape his image and likeness from materials that lay ready to hand, and his hand was to some extent subdued to what it worked in." The result of Bates' balanced approach is a most informative addition to a small but growing number of biographical studies of the poet. Bates, in fact, is part of a new group of scholars one might loosely

call the Huntington School of Stevens critics, whose literary interpretations and speculations are grounded in intensive archival study of the poet's papers at the Huntington Library and elsewhere. Bates' book exemplifies the best in this valuable alternative to the useful postmodernist approaches that have dominated the discussion of Stevens for a decade. In *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*, Milton J. Bates helps us to see more clearly Wallace Stevens' evolution as a poet who was made out of the substance of the various regions, physical as well as metaphysical, which he inhabited over the course of his career.

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### **Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens.**

By Charles Berger. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Although "The Auroras of Autumn" has held a special place in studies of Stevens written in the past twenty years, his other late poems have not fared quite as well. Previous to the work of Joseph Riddel and J. Hillis Miller in the mid-sixties, *Harmonium* was generally considered Stevens' greatest book. With Riddel's and Miller's work, there came a greater appreciation for the philosophical Stevens of the late poems. An exception to this shift in evaluation was Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings*, in which poems like "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and "The Course of a Particular" were disparaged for their so-called aridity. Harold Bloom's *Poems of our Climate* did much to restore "An Ordinary Evening" to its rightful place in the estimation of Stevens' readers. Now Charles Berger, a critic who has more in common with Vendler than with Bloom, gives us a fine book devoted solely to Stevens' late poetry.

In *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, Berger "offers a reading of the major poems, long and short, of Wallace Stevens' last decade and provides a shape, or a plot, to the final movement of his career" (p. xi). Berger is not the first to map a teleological progression to Stevens' career, nor is he unique in stressing the elegiac dimension of Stevens' work, even though his readings offer ample evidence that Stevens may very well be the greatest elegiac poet to write in English. What is new in Berger's study is the argument that Stevens' obsession with death was not merely personal but was a deeply felt response to the second world war. In particular, he argues that "Esthétique du Mal" and "The Auroras of Autumn" should be considered war poems. In the course of five chapters, Berger offers close readings of selected poems with the aim of charting Stevens' development toward the late lyrics of *The Rock* wherein he questions his own afterlife in literary history. The book's focus is narrow, although this in itself is not a problem because the topic Berger deals with is so important. Berger restricts himself to a careful exegesis of individual poems. He is attentive to Stevens' allusions to his own poetry, but he rarely refers to other poets. When he cites other critics, he does so only to corroborate his reading.

The first chapter focuses on "Esthétique du Mal" as a series of postures assumed when living under threat of total war. Although he reads the poem as Stevens' response to World War II, he does not hunt for imaginary historical parallels. The strength of Berger's argument rests upon his detailed reading of the poem as an elegiac rendering of a world threatened with apocalyptic violence: "the poem does seem to drift from neurasthenia in the face of apocalyptic threat, through elegiac and tragic response (including the strong discovery of fate), to moments of near-prophecy such as the 'return to birth' spoken of in canto x" (p. 21). The spiritual recovery he finds at the end of "Esthétique du Mal" is more tenuous in "The Auroras of Autumn," the subject of his second chapter. He argues that "what triggered the finding of the auroras by Stevens was not so much a text as an event: the dropping of the atomic bomb, the epitome of all the great explosions prefigured in the volcano's trembling. For just as Stevens could read the volcano [in "Esthétique du Mal"] as an ancient figure for present calamity, so the auroras merged old and current versions of apocalypse in a dense textual weave" (p. 35). Berger's reading of the poem is provocative; however, his decision to proceed through the poem canto by canto makes the chapter somewhat tedious.

In the third chapter, he turns to "Credences of Summer" and "An Ordinary Evening" as Stevens' poems of peace or what Berger also calls his "counterapocalyptic poems." In these poems, he finds the apocalyptic vision tempered by a "return to origins in order to recapture the 'sense / Of cold and earliness'" (p. 97). Stevens' obsession with death now takes the form of an "internalization" whereby Stevens becomes more and more elusive as he comes to depend upon purely internal references within his own canon. This process finds its telos in the poems of *The Rock*. In his last poems, Stevens seeks to avoid the premature closure threatened by the publication of his *Collected Poems*: "For Stevens, tradition resides within his *oeuvre*, rather than the other way around. Survival of the literary self and survival of the tradition become synonymous . . . The implicit program of these late lyrics instructs us that only the ever-active imagination can project and preserve the forms of literary immortality, even in repose" (p. 147).

As I have mentioned above, Berger's book is narrow in scope as he rarely ventures beyond close readings of the chosen poems. It is this allegiance to new criticism and to the humanistic categories of imagination and the Romantic self that aligns his work with Vendler's. The readings themselves are consistently intelligent and enlightening. Because he is unperturbed by the irreducible ambiguities in Stevens, Berger rarely lapses into strained attempts to force passages to fit his thesis. However, his resolute avoidance of theoretical concerns, whether they be Stevens' own or those of his critics, results in readings that may be characterized as sophisticated paraphrases—readings which aim to reproduce the meanings of the poems by translating Stevens' metaphors into a biographically and historically grounded context. Furthermore, he limits his discussion of Stevens' critics almost exclusively to Vendler and Bloom. The reason for this curiously narrow circumscription may be explained in part by his polemical interests. He attempts to revise Bloom's genealogy by arguing for Yeats, particularly the Yeats of *Last Poems*, as the precursor of the late Stevens. The other reason for his ignoring Stevens criticism is revealed in various references to the unity of writing and voice and the preservation of the self that he calls Stevens' final achievement. Berger's refusal to consider Stevens as a philosophical poet reflects his interpretation of Stevens' obsession with death as a fear of the loss of voice. Thus, he is astonished that Stevens should admit in "The Planet on the Table" that "poems are *written*, rather than chanted, intoned, or whatever" (p. 178). But I would suggest that it is precisely this consciousness of the link between death and writing, the very recognition that death is what makes writing and, therefore, poetry possible, that charac-

terizes Stevens' modernism and is the most distinctive trait of his elegiac mode. To misread the poem as Berger does is to fail to heed Stevens' warning, "Never suppose an inventing mind as source." Like Vendler, Berger wishes to preserve the creative self as the originator of the poem against the dislodging of the centrality of the subject by such critics as Michel Benamou, Paul Bové, and Joseph Riddel.

The limitations of Berger's book are reflected in his erroneous citation of a letter to Thomas McGreevy as Stevens' only reference to Yeats in his letters. Berger, apparently, has been misled by the index to the *Letters*, which only mentions Yeats once, but Stevens also refers to Yeats in an important letter to José Rodríguez Feo written the same year as the one to McGreevy. Because Berger argues that Yeats is more important to Stevens than either Whitman or Emerson, it is curious that he should make this error. He cites the McGreevy letter as evidence of Stevens' recognition that the poet must shape the boundaries of his career by constituting tradition as something that exists within his own work, not outside it. But the letter he fails to mention suggests that Stevens was quite aware that the notion of the inviolability of the poet's canon is mere illusion. He writes to Rodríguez Feo that he doesn't "read other peoples' poetry at all" and complains how most people read poetry in order to find echoes of poets with whom they are familiar. His refusal to read, he says, "is something that I have learned to do from Yeats who was extremely persnickety about being himself" (*Letters*, p. 575). To refute this, we could begin by citing a letter to Bernard Heringman in which he says he always reads a great deal before he begins to write (*Letters*, p. 798). But we can ignore this and the many allusions to Whitman, Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth in his poetry. What stands out is Stevens' playful disingenuousness as he claims to learn to avoid reading and, thus, echoing other poets by reading Yeats. This letter suggests that the Yeatsian gesture towards closure, however tempting it may have been for Stevens, remains foreign to his poetics. And it is his recognition of the link between his own disappearance and the afterlife of his poetry that leads to his acceptance of the invariable openness of any poet's, especially his own, *oeuvre*.

I should emphasize in conclusion that within the confines he has set himself, Berger does a fine job explicating Stevens' late poetry. His attentiveness to the pervasiveness of the elegiac in Stevens' poetry will prove rewarding to readers. My criticisms, however, are meant to point out that the critic who refuses to attend to the theoretical dimension of Stevens ignores a vital part of his poetry, one that must be accounted for by anyone who reads a poet whose every poem is a form of farewell.

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