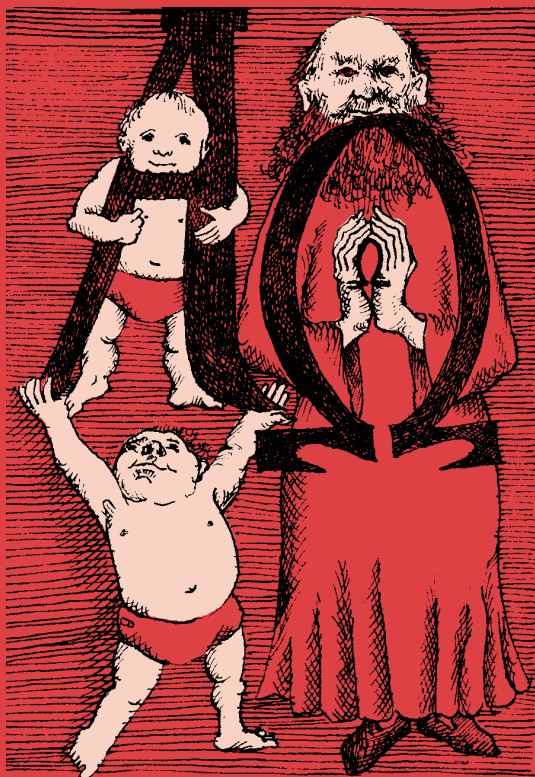


The Wallace Stevens Journal



Special Issue: Approaching the Millennium
Stevens and Apocalyptic Language

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Contents

Wallace Stevens' "Puella Parvula" and the "Haunt of Prophecy" — <i>Malcolm Woodland</i>	99
"Cloudless the morning. It is he": The Return of the Figural in Stevens' Apocalypses — <i>Carolyn Masel</i>	111
"Gusts of Great Enkindlings": Spectral Apocalypse in "The Auroras of Autumn" — <i>Michael Hobbs</i>	126
Stevens, Benjamin, and Messianic Time — <i>Jonathan Ivory</i>	141
Stevens, Hegel, and the Palm at the End of the Mind — <i>Jennifer Bates</i>	152
"The Statue at the World's End": Monumental Art as Apocalypse — <i>Angus Cleghorn</i>	167
The World After Poetry: Revelation in Late Stevens — <i>James Longenbach</i>	187
Afterword: Last Words on Stevens and Apocalypse — <i>Langdon Hammer</i>	194
Poems	197
Reviews	205
News and Comments	211

Cover Art

Alpha and Omega, pen and ink drawing
from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"
by Kathryn Jacobi

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Wallace Stevens' "Puella Parvula" and the "Haunt of Prophecy"

MALCOLM WOODLAND

INCANTO IV OF "Sunday Morning," Wallace Stevens rejects the "haunt of prophecy" (*CP* 68) for its lack of enduring imaginative vitality. But the late lyric "Puella Parvula" finds Stevens still haunted by that old poetic haunt—at least according to Harold Bloom, for whom "Puella Parvula" shows, like "Saint John and the Back-Ache," that "Both the apocalyptic seer and the wary pain-of-the-past speak for Stevens" (300). Bloom's division between the apocalyptic and backward-looking Stevens seems odd, though, since apocalyptic writings betray a strong debt to earlier texts, and, in turn, form a significant part of the past that weighs so heavily on Stevens' imagination in these poems. In "Puella Parvula," Stevens' own complex relationship to the apocalyptic past initially emerges through a remarkable series of prophetic and apocalyptic echoes—echoes of the kind Eleanor Cook has elsewhere analyzed so thoroughly.¹ Cook notes that Stevens "decreates" his sources, and then moves

beyond, in order to retrieve what, after much testing, will hold.
And what is retrieved and holds is different in kind, not just in
degree, from what has preceded it. ("King James" 241)²

I, too, will be concerned with Stevens' differences from (and with) the past in "Puella Parvula," though I shall speak more of the persistence, rather than retrieval, of the past; in particular, I wish to explore some possible constraints upon Stevens' desire to differ, constraints inherent in that prophetic and apocalyptic tradition that he attempts to break with in this *anti*apocalyptic poem. Here, Cook's ("Introduction" 120) and Bloom's readings of "Puella Parvula" as "apocalyptic" prove especially suggestive, since I hope to show that its *anti*apocalyptic stance proves difficult to distinguish from an apocalyptic one. Jacques Derrida's and Frank Kermode's explorations of the paradoxes produced by *anti*apocalyptic writings are thus especially relevant to "Puella Parvula"; in particular, their work helps us to situate the poem's biblical echoes and its intensely conflicted thematization of gender in relation to the apocalyptic tradition and the postmodern distrust of that discourse.

Conveniently enough, Stevens' critics offer varied understandings of the key terms "apocalyptic" and "*anti*apocalyptic." It may be wise, though,

to begin with a brief definition of “apocalypse” in its biblical (and extra-canonical) forms. Richard Bauckham describes apocalypse as a highly specialized development of eschatological prophecy; it incorporates elements (dream visions, otherworldly journeys, angelic interpreters and guides, etc.) not native to earlier prophecy, and expands prophecy’s concerns with the future of the nation of Israel to include the end (both as termination and purpose) of the entire world (2–5).³ In apocalypse, the past is fulfilled only by means of a radical break with the past—a point emphasized in James Longenbach’s readings of the rhetoric of catastrophic disruption and termination in Stevens’ antiapocalyptic poetry. He shows Stevens rejecting not just the imminence of the end, but the very idea of “The End,” and offering a rhetoric of social continuity in opposition to the apocalypticism prevalent in some cultural and political spheres during and between the two World Wars.⁴ Cook (*Poetry* 267–94), Joseph Adamson, and Patricia Parker (236–43), in contrast, have shown how Stevens subtly undoes the metaphors of veiling and unveiling, appearance and reality, figure and truth, that are implicit in the concept of “apocalypse.” But the apocalyptic echoes of “Puella Parvula” are largely concerned with the idea of “The End.” Stevens’ “antiapocalyptic” stance in this poem takes the form of an opposition to the idea of any preordained end of history, and in particular to the biblical language in which that idea has been embodied.

It may facilitate the discussion, then, to begin with the poem and all its prophetic haunts:

Every thread of summer is at last unwoven.
 By one caterpillar is great Africa devoured
 And Gibraltar is dissolved like spit in the wind.

But over the wind, over the legends of its roaring,
 The elephant on the roof and its elephantine blaring,
 The bloody lion in the yard at night or ready to spring

From the clouds in the midst of trembling trees
 Making a great gnashing, over the water wallows
 Of a vacant sea declaiming with wide throat,

Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs
 Like a trumpet and says, in this season of memory,
 When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past,

Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind
 Gone wild, be what he tells you to be: *Puella*.
 Write *pax* across the window pane. And then

Be still. The *summarium in excelsis* begins . . .
 Flame, sound, fury composed . . . Hear what he says,
 The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale. (*CP* 456)

The possible coexistence of two sets of echoes in the poem's first lines—one Stevensian, one biblical—complicates any attempt at interpretation. The lion "ready to spring / From the clouds" and "one caterpillar," along with the uses of "dissolved" and "trembling," echo key passages from Old Testament prophecies of the Day of the Lord; "gnashing" recalls the activity (usually accompanied by wailing or weeping) performed by the wicked at the last days (at least according to New Testament eschatology—Matt. 13:42, 24:51, 25:30, Luke 13:28).⁵ Borroff (21–22) and Bloom (300), however, relate the animals in "Puella Parvula" to the lion and elephant of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" I v; they are vocal figures of a natural violence that must be tamed by "the heroic children whom time breeds / Against the first idea" (CP 385). Stevens' vocal tropes of the sea's meaningless sounds, too, are familiar from "Notes" I iii, "The Idea of Order at Key West," and many other passages. Since the "bloody lion" belongs to both realms of figuration, one might wonder whether the poet were now opening this "sovereign[] of the soul" (CP 124) to its prophetic past. Bloom describes the animals of "Puella Parvula" as "a giant, composite pathetic fallacy or series of impositions of an animal consciousness upon the reality of nature" (301); but the echoes of "Notes" also challenge the biblical ones, reducing the fearful voices of biblical prophecy that Stevens hears in the wind to mere animal or natural violence and noise.

The provenance of this wind and of the eleventh line's trumpet, however, should prevent any critic from resting at this opposition. Bloom (300–301) hears Shelley here, and identifies the wind, leaves, and trumpet of this poem with those of the "Ode to the West Wind"—though Shelley's trumpet is, of course, also biblical and both repeats and speaks against biblical tropes of the prophetic voice of God (e.g., Rev. 1:11), or against the angelic and apocalyptic trumpets of Rev. 8–10.⁶ It seems that Stevens hears Shelley's West Wind *and* the whole prophetic tradition to which the "Ode" belongs, and then imposes his own animal tropes on that wind. But both types of trope are rejected when Stevens' trumpet triumphs "over the wind, [and] over the legends of its roaring," so that any tension between them loses its significance. It may prove preferable to suggest that Stevens presents, in these different legends, two extreme responses to the destructive force of the wind: one that finds emblems of divine providence in it, and one that hears mere noise; one that fills the wind with disturbing meanings, and one that empties it of significance (or makes the absence of significance its only significance). Stevens does not triumph "over" these two realms of figuration by transcending them, but rather by discovering a middle ground, the space between divine and brute force in which it becomes possible to tell "the human tale."

Such a reading, though, reveals further tensions in the poem, since Stevens' rejection of the tropes of prophecy depends on another such trope—the trumpet of prophecy. This fact suggests that at least two different sorts of echoes haunt this poem: one in which Stevens turns against

the echoed text in a fairly straightforward fashion (caterpillar, dissolution, lion, trembling, and gnashing, or elephant, lion, and declaiming sea), and one in which he appropriates and remakes the original figure (the trumpet of prophecy) to suit his own poetic project. Here Stevens differs from and with Shelley, who wishes to be the means through which wind and trumpet are united in a new trope of prophetic voice: "Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!" (l. 68–69). Stevens instead plays an antiphonal challenge to Shelley's prophetic appeal; rather than turning to this wind for inspiration, Stevens blows his own horn against it and its history, against the tropes in the preceding stanzas, and against Shelley's desire to be the medium through which that transcendent force might speak. Yet at the same time, this gesture places Stevens within that prophetic lineage against which he turns in "Puella Parvula." This trumpet breaks with biblical and romantic tropes of transcendence and becomes, by speaking thus at this particular moment, the appropriate instrument on which Stevens may proclaim, in the priestly language of "the imagination's Latin" (*CP* 397), the triumph of the human imagination—a sort of instantly self-fulfilling prophecy. Stevens thus attempts to position himself with the greatest possible precision at a turning point in the history of tropes, ending one era and beginning a new one in the same moment. The use of this trumpet to reject the other biblical tropes and the transcendent overtones of Shelley's already secularized trumpet exemplify that "retrieval" and "differen[ce] in kind" noted by Cook in Stevens' remaking of biblical tropes and figures.

Yet the apocalyptic tradition persists in "Puella Parvula" through the presence of something more than just this one figure. Here Frank Kermode's and Jacques Derrida's discussions of apocalypse help to provide a more precise sense of this "something more"; both authors describe the ways in which writings with an explicitly antiapocalyptic *content* may nevertheless repeat certain formal features (or, in Derrida's essay, "tonal" features) of apocalyptic writings. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode insists that it may be impossible to escape the concordance of beginnings and ends so essential (in his view) to narrative forms—a concordance exemplified, for him, by apocalyptic thinking and writing.⁷ Such an escape would involve a step outside of literary history, a break with the history of apocalypse that would in some sense remain apocalyptic in its very desire to transcend history. The apocalyptic crisis of "the new modernism" (114)—presumably what we now call postmodernism—resides in the absence of apocalyptic beliefs, in its own break with the past and the discourse of the end, its sense of itself as "a period of perpetual transition" (28), as Kermode claims in the following comment on Beckett: "It is a world crying out for forms and stations, and for apocalypse; all it gets is vain temporality, mad, multiform antithetical influx" (115). For Kermode, the absence of apocalypse, the break with the fiction of the end, leads to or *is* this new apocalypse. In his critique of Kermode in *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur raises

similar questions about the possibility of a radical break with the past, although he appears to disagree with Kermode's belief that the continued validity and vitality of our fictions depends on our confidence and belief in those fictions—belief, above all, in their correspondence to reality. For Ricoeur, the impossibility of a total break with the past and with its forms of discourse lies instead in the nature of discourse itself:

I hold that the search for concordance is part of the unavoidable assumptions of discourse and of communication. Either discourse or violence, Eric Weil has said in his *Logique de la Philosophie*. The universal pragmatics of discourse says what amounts to the same thing. Intelligibility always precedes itself and justifies itself. (2:28)

But, in fact, Ricoeur's comments seem more or less in harmony with Kermode's observation, in his discussion of "the new modernism," that "Schism is meaningless without reference to some prior condition; the absolutely New is simply unintelligible, even as novelty" (116). At any rate, Kermode's recent "Waiting for the End" offers a pleasingly concise formulation of his apocalyptic paradox: there he suggests that "If in addition we deny all end-directed history we have apocalyptically eliminated apocalyptic thinking" (261).

Derrida's essay, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," is concerned at a much more particular and detailed level with the possibility or impossibility of putting an end to the discourse of the end. Derrida conceives of apocalypse not just as a narrative of last things—though that aspect of apocalypse is crucial to his essay—but as a terminal discourse that is always marked by a certain tone, or rather by a shift in tone. Derrida considers the "philosophical, onto-eschato-teleological interpretation" (83) of apocalypse as "Unveiling or truth, apophantics of the imminence of the end" (84), but he also hears, in the repeated citations of "Come" that close Revelation, an "apocalypse of the apocalypse" (94), a "generalized derailment, . . . a *Verstimmung* multiplying the voices and making the tones shift [*sauter*], opening each word to the haunting memory [*hantise*] of the other in an uncontrollable polytonality" (83)—a play of tonal difference that exceeds and endlessly ends Revelation's own discourse of truth and ends. It is precisely this sense of an ending and this tonal shifting that come to haunt Derrida's own effort to escape the "powerful program that was also an untransgressible contract among discourses of the end" (80):

But then what is someone doing who tells you: I tell you this, I have come to tell you this, there is not, there never has been, there never will be an apocalypse, the apocalypse deceives, disappoints? There is the apocalypse *without* apocalypse. (94–95)

I shall return later to the “multiplying [of] voices” in Stevens’ poem; here, I would note that if apocalyptic and prophetic eschatology insist that history can be fulfilled only through a final break with history, Stevens would appear to propose another such break—a break with this break and its lengthy history. He would not, of course, break with history and historical discourse altogether, but rather would displace one fiction of history with another, the *heilsgeschichte* with the human tale. But to the extent that he positions himself at the end of an era, foresees the beginning of a new one, and announces the end of the end in an ever-heightened rhetoric that gestures toward the annunciation of some truth, Stevens remains apocalyptic even while making his most antiapocalyptic gestures, engaging, perhaps, in a poetic version of that “going-one-better in eschatological eloquence” noted by Derrida in much post-Kantian philosophy (80). Stevens’ appropriation of an old apocalyptic trope thus signals a more general persistence of the apocalyptic mode that has already been under way in this antiapocalyptic poem.

Such considerations lead one to wonder whether the poem actually achieves the triumph it proclaims. At the very moment in which Stevens announces the imagination’s victory, the poem’s tone shifts abruptly and new divisions and tensions emerge:

Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs
 Like a trumpet and says, in this season of memory,
 When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past,

Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind
 Gone wild, be what he tells you to be: *Puella*.
 Write *pax* across the window pane. And then

Be still. The *summarium in excelsis* begins . . .
 Flame, sound, fury composed . . . Hear what he says,
 The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale.

Here the wordplay on rising and falling seems instructive. Stevens begins with “The elephant on the roof,” proceeds upward to the lion “ready to spring / From the clouds,” ascends to the “mighty imagination” that is heard “over the wind,” triumphing “Over all these” (my emphasis in both cases), and finally reaches “the *summarium in excelsis*,” the highest of heights, at least etymologically. Yet all these ever-heightened gestures toward transcendence occur while “the leaves fall like things mournful of the past.” Are these the leaves of the tradition Stevens has left behind, or those of his own oeuvre that must leave that past behind? Or do these latter leaves become part of the past even as they make their break with the past? Stevens has, after all, included some of his own favorite tropes among the ones rejected in the first three stanzas. He may again echo Shelley’s “Ode” here (“Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: / What if

my leaves are falling like its own?" [ll. 57–58]), but the mournfulness attributed to the leaves is Stevens' own invention and suggests a profound sense of loss even in this moment of triumph.

More significant, the poem's chief locus of tension shifts here from Stevens' engagement with the autumn wind and the prophetic past to a more inward and quite specifically gendered struggle between "wild bitch," "Puella," "dauntless master," and narrating voice. According to Bloom, the "Puella" of the title is a "reborn version of the muse" (300), a displaced and unsuccessfully interiorized version of Stevens' Whitmanian oceanic muse.⁸ But the "wild bitch," too, is an interior figure, and much of the poem's sense of crisis appears to stem from her location within the speaker's imagination. It is worth remembering that Flora Lowzen, "Sordid Melpomene" (CP 427) and "Madame La Fleurie" are as uncanny and unsettling as the "wild bitch," but are not described or addressed as interior figures, even though we may feel inclined to interpret them as such; the poems in which they appear do not communicate the same intense and direct sense of emotional crisis as does "Puella Parvula."⁹ Here, Stevens' inner muse has been driven wild, and the cost of resolving this crisis seems uncomfortably high. He does not wish to transform this "wild bitch" into just a "Puella"—a word that Catullus, as Eleanor Cook notes ("Introduction" 120), applied to his beloved Lesbia—but into a "Puella Parvula," a very small girl, a perhaps de-eroticized or infantilized inner muse, and one whom Stevens now limits to a silent and ephemeral note-taking ("Write *pax* across the window pane"). He seems to be writing a sort of anti-invocation here, enjoining his muse to silence rather than requesting her inspiration or song—a gesture that remains unique in Stevens' poetry.¹⁰ In contrast, the "dauntless master" to whom the "Puella" must listen reminds us of that patriarchy of the imagination traceable through Canon Aspirin or the angel of "Notes" III v–vi and vii–viii, respectively, the father or "Master O master" of "The Auroras of Autumn," the "more severe, / More harassing master" (CP 486) of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "the patriarchs / Of truth" (OP 120) in "The Role of the Idea in Poetry," and other emblems of the sublime and prophetic tendency in Stevens' poetry. Stevens thus engages with this tradition only by silencing another aspect of his creative personality—or perhaps he responds to the disturbing presence of that "wild bitch" by reasserting his own place within a masculine prophetic tradition. Do the "leaves" of the twelfth line mourn these now-silenced muse figures, or the prophetic tradition whose end Stevens announces?

Some answer to these questions may emerge from a closer consideration of the complex and conflicted transitional space in which "Puella Parvula" unfolds: old fictions have been deflated in its opening stanzas, yet something of the prophetic tradition remains; the trumpet of prophecy has sounded anew, but the new fiction—"the human tale" to which Stevens asks his "Puella" to attend—has yet to be written or uttered and in fact never appears in the poem.¹¹ In spite of the triumph of the trumpeting

imagination, "Puella Parvula" remains situated *between* fictions, or becomes, in thus bearing witness to the end of old fictions and foreseeing the beginning of new ones, a new fiction of the liminal, of the transition between fictions, a paradoxical trope for the space between old tropes and new.¹² It may be tempting to suggest that it is by remaining in this transitional territory and by opening the poem to shifts in tone, figures of psychic division, disjunctive syntax, uncertainty and ambiguity—in short, by foregoing the predictive certitude of prophetic and apocalyptic rhetoric—that Stevens comes closest to breaking with the prophetic and apocalyptic tradition. Yet this gesture involves the poem in yet another paradoxical relation with the discourse of the end: this most non-apocalyptic moment becomes an apocalyptic one insofar as it successfully negotiates a break with the past. My description of the poem's transitional nature seems, after all, to situate it within what Angus Fletcher calls the "prophetic moment," a "threshold" state characterized by "an elusive betweenness" (49). But Fletcher's "prophetic moment" lies between temple and labyrinth, sacred and secular, eternal and temporal, whereas the "betweenness" of "Puella Parvula" depends on or results from the rejection of the first term of each of these pairs. One might thus see in "Puella Parvula" the apocalyptic crisis of "perpetual transition" that Kermode considers characteristic of the "new modernism," or what Martin Jay describes as the postmodern tendency to "abandon[] traditional notions of dramatic or narrative resolution in favor of an unquenchable fascination with being on the verge of an end that never comes" (87)—"not simply apocalypse now, but apocalypse forever," as Klaus Scherpe suggests (paraphrased in Jay 88).

I would appear, in the preceding comments, to identify Stevens as a postmodernist, though the kind of resolution suggested by his final appeal to a "dauntless master"—emblematic, perhaps, of a desire to move beyond a state of "perpetual transition"—provides strong reasons for hesitating before such a claim. The poem's treatment of gender proves especially significant in this regard. Alice Jardine has suggested "The space 'outside of' the conscious subject has always connoted the feminine in the history of Western thought" and that "any movement into alterity is a movement into that female space" (114–15); one might, in response to her claims, read the dominant "philosophical, onto-eschato-teleological interpretation" (Derrida 83) of apocalypse as a *resistance* to such alterity, a desire for closure in the final "truth" represented by a single, male deity. Mary Carpenter and Martin Jay have observed that Revelation portrays such closure only after expelling everything that is perceived as negative in female sexuality (or, for Carpenter, everything that the apocalyptic believer unconsciously fears about his own sexuality); such qualities are projected onto the figure of the whore of Babylon, thereby being separated out, named, and eschatologically eliminated.¹³ In "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," Derrida suggests that Kant's apocalyptically antiapocalyptic discourse

assumes “an excluded middle” in the form of the veiled goddess Isis, the feminine “other” that must be excluded by a “non-emasculated *logos*” (79), the *logos* of the Western phallogocentric tradition. Carpenter’s and Jay’s readings may not capture the full complexity of Revelation’s thematization of gender, since, as Carpenter herself notes, the apocalyptic marriage of Rev. 19 figures humanity (the church) as bride to Christ/the Lamb as bridegroom (a figure recalling the parable of the wise and foolish virgins of Matt. 25). I do not wish to make any direct identification between the female figures of “Puella Parvula” and those of Revelation—the former, as I hope I have demonstrated, are much more readily explicable in relation to Stevens’ own oeuvre—but I would suggest that Stevens, in “Puella Parvula,” hears the voice of a feminine other within himself and resists, by reducing “wild bitch” to silent “*Puella*,” that “movement into alterity” described by Jardine, the movement beyond the masculine language of truth. Derrida’s observations on polytonality and polyvocality in “Of an Apocalyptic Tone” also help define the position of “Puella Parvula” in relation to the apocalyptic tradition. In its prophetic echoes, and in the struggle among “wild bitch,” “*Puella*,” narrating voice, and “dauntless master,” “Puella Parvula” may offer another version of that “generalized derailment” and “uncontrollable polytonality” that Derrida finds inscribed within Revelation—or, perhaps, within which Revelation’s ontotheological discourse is inscribed. In rejecting that plurality of voices and announcing the imminence of a single, dauntlessly mastering voice in the poem’s last lines, Stevens turns away from any “apocalypse of the apocalypse” of the kind Derrida undertakes in his (anti)apocalyptic essay; instead, Stevens, in a more conventionally (or ontotheologically) apocalyptic gesture, attempts to close off that “outside of the apocalypse” (95), that “multiplying [of] voices” and “uncontrollable polytonality.” Such closure is more a desire than an achievement in the poem, of course, and a reading that adopted Derrida’s terms would have to place “Puella Parvula” in a transitional space between apocalypse and “apocalypse of apocalypse.” It remains divided between the desire to proclaim the end of “The End” and the need to rejoin and reaffirm that patriarchy of the imagination represented by the “dauntless master.”

These more general issues lead to the critical disagreements over some other Stevens poems, such as Bloom’s and Cook’s contrasting descriptions of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” For Bloom, this poem exhibits Stevens’ “apocalyptic impulse” (298), whereas Cook reads it as “a purgatorial poem in the antiapocalyptic mode” (*Poetry* 273). Does an anti/apocalyptic blurring similar to that observed in “Puella Parvula” lie behind such differences? In “Puella Parvula,” at any rate, emphasis on *what* Stevens opposes might result in an antiapocalyptic reading; attention to *how* that opposition is articulated, on the other hand, could produce a reading that aligns Stevens with an apocalyptic and prophetic tradition. Of course, a poem’s “what” and “how” cannot be so readily isolated, and

this particular mingling of the apocalyptic and antiapocalyptic has, in the last analysis, an antiapocalyptic force. Such mixing would not be characteristic of a traditional, “onto-eschato-teleological” version of apocalypse, but may be inevitable in a poem that adopts an antiapocalyptic stance.

“Puella Parvula,” written some thirty-four years after Stevens rejected the haunt of prophecy, thus seems doubly haunted: haunted at the outset by apocalyptic fears—the fears, perhaps, of a seventy-year-old poet facing his own mortality—and, as Stevens turns against those fearful figures, by that more general apocalyptic concern with ends and beginnings, the apocalyptic desire to break with the past. Stevens’ own utterance might be taken for a sort of poetic revenant, another shadow of the discourse of the end. Unfolding in this ambiguous, transitional place between divine prophecy and human tale, where the leaves become part of the past they mourn, “Puella Parvula” shows Stevens as both haunter and haunted.

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Notes

¹Eleanor Cook has noted that “The dauntless master” (CP 456) “dissolves the world in biblical language” (“Introduction” 120), but does not give a detailed account of this language.

²Barbara M. Fisher makes a similar point when she notes “Stevens uses parody to establish a link with traditional sources—the ‘romantic tenements’ of aesthetic form and poetic utterance, the confluence of poetry and religion in a sacred text. But Stevens is also using parody to separate himself, to maintain distance from these same sources” (*Rendezvous* 24). The seriousness of “Puella Parvula”—at no point does it strike the note of parody one finds in earlier anti-doctrinal poems such as “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws” (1921) or “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (1922)—already indicates, perhaps, the greater weight with which the past weighs upon this poem.

³Stevens either ignores or is unaware of the differences between eschatological prophecy and apocalypse, and he tends to conflate elements borrowed from both genres and from Jewish and Christian versions of apocalypse.

⁴Cf. in particular 83–102, 176–96, 199–221, and 237–48.

⁵For the lion, see, for example, Isaiah: “the Lord of hosts [shall] come down to fight for mount Zion.” “Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey” (Isa. 31:4). We know of Stevens’ familiarity with this figure from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” a work written in the same year as “Puella Parvula”; in canto xi, Stevens describes “the lion of Juda” as “a cat of a sleek transparency / That shines with a nocturnal shine alone” (CP 472–73). See also Joel 1:4 for the caterpillar; Isa. 24:19 and 34:4 for examples of eschatological dissolution (“The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved” and “all the host of heaven shall be dissolved” respectively); and Joel 2:1, 2:10, and Isa. 64:2 for the “trembling” of peoples, earth, and heavens (and, one might assume, trees) at the last days.

⁶Cook observes this same genealogy in her reading of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” xii: “Stevens hears what it is that Shelley challenged with his apocalyptic voice in *Ode to the West Wind*: the ancient prophetic Word of God” (*Poetry* 283).

⁷This theme appears throughout Kermode's book; a more general discussion of apocalypse takes place in 3–31, while 67–89 deal more specifically with the relations between Elizabethan tragedy and changing beliefs about the shape and meaning of history.

⁸Much has been written on Stevens' muses and "interior paramours," and a useful summary of some key readings appears in 46–48 of Barbara M. Fisher's "A Woman with the Hair of a Pythoness." Fisher criticizes those interpreters who would reduce Stevens' female figures to an underlying Jungian, sensory, or Freudian essence (Michel Benamou, Edward Kessler, and Harold Bloom, respectively), and insists that Stevens' paramour has (in an amusing quote from Roethke) " 'more sides than a seal' " (48).

⁹Cook suggests that Flora Lowzen is "the disabling muse, for which we have no clear figure" (*Poetry* 180). For Bloom, "Madame La Fleurie" "is truly the last version of the American muse-as-mother, and so a more authentic final vision of the interior paramour" (360). There is an old poetic tradition, of course, of calling upon unsettling and uncanny figures for inspiration; here one might remember Virgil's appeal to the rulers and inhabitants of the underworld before describing Aeneas' descent in Book VI of the *Aeneid* (ll. 264–67), or Chaucer's call to Thesiphone—not a muse, but a fury—at the beginning of *Troilus and Criseyde* (ll. 6–14).

¹⁰Stevens was fond enough of issuing detailed instructions to these figures, rather than merely requesting their assistance, as is evident from "O Florida, Venerable Soil" (1922), "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night," "To the One of Fictive Music," or the long passages addressed to the "celestial paramours" (*OP* 79) in sections ii, iv, vi, and vii of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue."

¹¹It might be worth remembering here that Stevens also chose, for whatever reason, to leave his proposed fourth section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "It Must Be Human," unwritten.

¹²Vendler describes Stevens' work as "a poetry of the transitional moment, of the not-quite-here and the not-yet-gone" (47). More recently, Jarraway borrows from Heidegger to characterize the later works as a poetry of a " 'double lack and a double Not: the No-more of the gods that have fled and the Not-yet of the god that is coming' " (14).

¹³"In the narrative of male sexual paranoia, 'Woman' must be constructed as that known object to which male anxiety can be transferred" (Carpenter 117). Carpenter, after discussing the false prophetess, Jezebel (Rev. 2), and the "woman clothed with the sun" (Rev. 12), notes that "Only later, in the figure of the Whore, is female power successfully reduced to the single element of sexuality, which can be represented as wholly foul and polluting, and then wholly destroyed" (118). Her reading of Revelation emphasizes the text's misogyny, insisting that its violent sexual imagery (particularly the whore of Babylon in Rev. 17) does not merely function as the vehicle of a political metaphor, but rather constitutes a literal attack on women. Martin Jay's commentary on the Whore (in "The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Inability to Mourn") is more psychoanalytic in emphasis, as the following passage indicates: "Cast out of the psyche rather than symbolically integrated, the identified-with mother returns, as it were, as the avenging 'whore of Babylon' and 'mother of harlots' so ferociously reviled by John of Patmos and his progeny" (96).

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“Cloudless the morning. It is he”: The Return of the Figural in Stevens’ Apocalypses

CAROLYN MASEL

*Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
—“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”*

THE REFLECTIONS OFFERED here have evolved largely through thinking about these famous lines at the end of the final section of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” An enormous amount has been written about them, so much do they suggest while remaining remarkably open. Certain kinds of questions persist in the minds of critics—for example, questions of gender politics. What kind of love involves the promise of capture? The traditional answer is the (normatively masculine) sonneteer’s: the sacrifice of mutability (fluency) is accomplished in the interest of the longer, greater “life” as art. The conception of revolutions becoming crystalline, without ceasing, though surely losing some of their mobility, also seems to image something about the act of writing, the transition of the poem from performative thought to object as it approaches its inevitable end, the trace of that process caught in the glint of drying ink. In terms of the order in which information is presented, it looks as though the naming of the beloved effects her capture; the logic of the tenses, however, suggests the change of state will precede the naming, perhaps even enabling it to take place.

If the precise viscosity of the revolving mundo is one of the “change[s] not quite completed” (CP 406) here, then the degree of human intelligence of the addressee, as against the degree of abstraction, is another. Indeed, one easy evasion of questions about the politics of appropriation involves a slide toward the abstract pole of prosopopoeia, taking the line that the addressee is merely a mundo, a world, traditionally imaged as feminine Earth, and hence fittingly, and commensurately with Stevens’ Platonism, surrounded by the crystal spheres with which she is in harmony. The “you” of Stevens’ very last addressing of her perhaps achieves something of the same reification. Although this Platonic conception is undeniably a part of the meaning, it is possibly a part that tends to render the irrational ra-

tional. For, in addition to smoothing over a transfer of power, in its omission of the chemical it misses out on the connection with the Book of Revelation, with its “sea of glass like unto crystal” (Rev. 4:6), its “pure river of water of life, clear as crystal” (Rev. 22:1), and the crystalline light of the (feminized) New Jerusalem as it descends from heaven. By missing that connection, it misses not only the spousal connotations of a new name given to a purified bride, but also the violence involved in that process of purification, a violence that, it seems to me, Stevens’ poem acknowledges.

It will be evident that this last line remains for me a site of profound ambivalence. Unable to resist the triumphant rhetoric and the sheer richness of association, I remain uneasy about both the celestial destiny of the addressee and the manner of her translation. She seems so unusually domestic and companionable and *figural* (as well as, by turn, seductive and abstract). What I shall be investigating here is not primarily a question of gender politics (although it will be apparent that such questions are frequently at issue) so much as a struggle for power by Stevens over one aspect of his imagination, an aspect we might describe as an impulse toward the figural, where “figural” means “taking human form” rather than “metaphoric” or “typological.”¹ A proper treatment of this topic would involve a book-length study; I shall focus merely on some telling moments in Stevens’ battle with this impulse. It has seemed to me that the occasions on which the figural tends to return are apocalyptic, whether or not they occur at the end of a poem. Not all such returns involve conflict; nevertheless, a surprisingly consistent pattern emerges whereby the return of the figural is seen to be the site of a battle for poetic (i. e., speakerly) authority, or else shows signs that such a battle has taken place.

Before I embark on my tour of battle zones, however, I should like to set out my imagination’s response to that last line of “Notes” more fully, for in the superabundant world of associative thought, as in the mysterious realm of the collective unconscious wherein our myths are forged, there are connections to be made between the residually figural mundo revolving in crystal and religious imagery from various traditions. Stevens surely heard such connections, deliberately distinguishing “in crystal” from “in Christ” as part of a privileging of Platonism over Christianity that is part of this canto’s central strategy of undoing Christian typology. In terms of my argument here, we should note, too, the substitution of an abstract word for a figural one, and the flicker of anxiety about the figural that that move bespeaks. The remarkably consistent image evoked for me by the poem’s last line, however, has seemed almost too banal to mention, for it is a feminized version of Vitruvian Man, Leonardo da Vinci’s depiction of the body as an image of divine harmony (see Fig. 1). That this image should persist is hardly surprising, so ubiquitous has it become; but it is also an apt analogy for Stevens’ final image, since in Leonardo’s drawing that harmony between man as microcosm and the universe as macrocosm is imaged as a geometric fit of the extended body within both the square

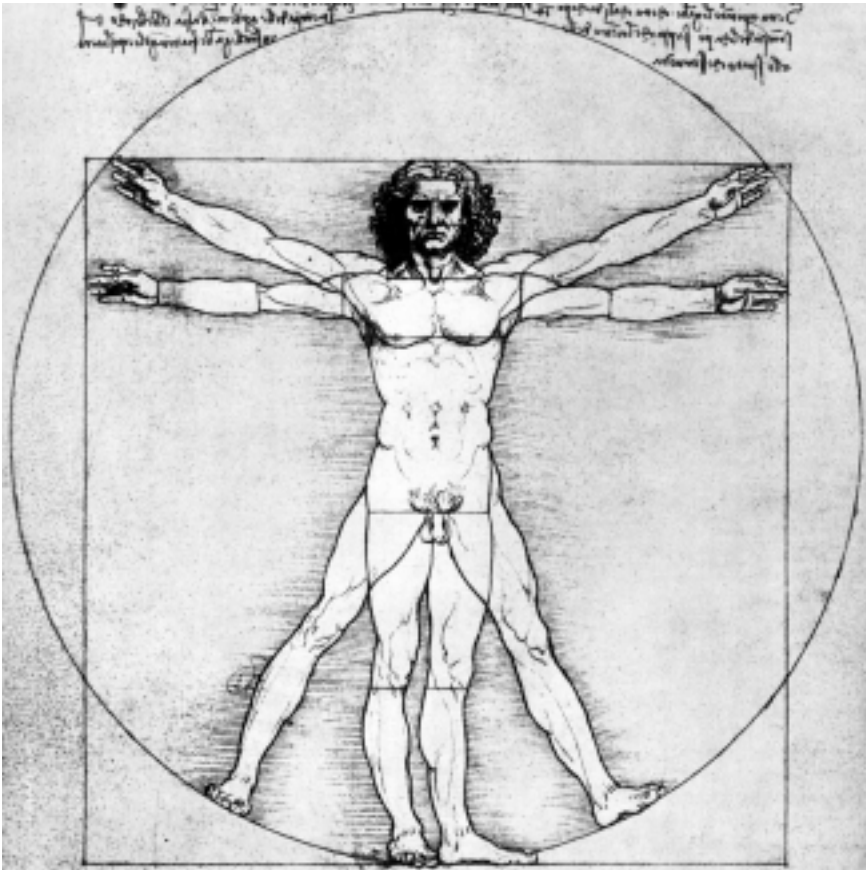


Fig. 1. Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man. From *Leonardo da Vinci* © 1956

and the circle (suggesting two of the five Platonic solids), the circle having special significance as the shape of perfection, and a long association with the divine.² From my contemporary perspective, the proliferation of arms and legs in the drawing that diagrams different poses can also be read as a plurality, suggesting deities and other supernatural beings from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, beings frequently involved in the judgment of the dead.³ Alternatively, Leonardo's drawing might even be read as an image of movement, representing a fixed figure in a revolving sphere. (To read this way, you have to match alternate limbs.) The later, related images of man as microcosm by Robert Fludd are probably more iconographically relevant, though they lack the airy mobility of Leonardo's drawing. The best known of these is the image on the title-page of *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica atque Technica Historia* (see Fig. 2). In this image, man as microcosm is surrounded by the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, with the celestial sphere of the fixed stars on the outside, and then the planets, each in its concentric ring, with man in the

center.⁴ The gender of these images remains uncompromisingly masculine, as do all of the images of man as microcosm that I have seen.⁵ To read Stevens' feminine revolving figure against this tradition is to see him, for a moment, as a radical revisionist, until one realizes that he makes no claims for the centrality, and hence the representativeness, of the feminine figure and that, indeed, the speaking "I" in relation to the addressee in effect de-centers her.⁶ Alternatively, an address to the mundos-as-Earth *would* seem to position her as central, *but only providing that* the addressor remain a diminutive, eccentric figure on her surface. Note, in addition, that in this reading she acquires centrality only in direct proportion to her degree of abstraction or loss of figural form.

The impulse toward the figural (the propensity to image the human form) is, I have suggested, only one possible style of prosopopoeia. We can devise a kind of sliding scale, analogous to the one that characterizes Stevens' conception of reality and the imagination and actually not unrelated to it, with the fully human—either oneself or someone utterly Other, with an autonomous consciousness—at one pole, and the insentient abstract at the other. Both poles are notional; they are not represented in the poetry. In between them lies the variously haunted world of prosopopoeia. Insofar as the addressee of the last line of "Notes," III x is figural, for so she is constructed throughout the course of the canto, she approaches the human end of the scale; it is her propensity to retain her humanity, despite being terrestrial, and summer, and night, and fluent mundo, that gives rise to my qualms about her final imprisonment in the crystalline revolutions of *écriture*.



Fig. 2. Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris. . .*
From Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd* © 1979

My reading of this canto's final move of deferred fulfillment and reification as a defensive strategy is supported by other evidence in Stevens' oeuvre;⁷ for there is a good deal of it to suggest that he deeply mistrusted the propensity in himself for figural representation. For example, in "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," an early poem (1918), he depicts this tendency as instinctual, bespeaking a lack of imaginative sophistication and, hence, as a kind of failing or weakness. The only redeeming aspect of this weakness is that it is shared; it allows him to represent himself as typically human, like the *hombre* of Williams' poem that serves as its epigraph and theme.⁸ In a sense, Stevens' poem is about the treatment of prior texts, in this case Whitman as well as Williams, offering its own treatment as an example of the ineluctable tendency of the poet-as-reader to make them over in his own image. The whole poem thus becomes a kind of composite monster ("chimera" is Stevens' word), in which both the alterity of the epigraph and the integrity of Stevens' response remain incomplete.

"Nuances" is not apocalyptic; it is concerned with an uncovering of a different kind. It demonstrates the fundamental yearning for presence that is at least implicit if not hidden in all poems of address, and it also demonstrates, by the by, that a true uncovering, a revealing of a condition of mere being, is not linguistically achievable, both because language takes place in time and because it consists wholly of relations. Nonetheless, "Nuances" may shed light on other, unequivocally apocalyptic, occasions, since it is so clearly a site of conflict, the tension between the definitively human impulse to posit a human intelligence in the sky—or to make a companion of a bird or a horse—and the resistance to that impulse being the chief source of its considerable pathos.

"Nuances" is characterized by the poignancy of commands that feel like optatives: the language of prayer. "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," which deals with the question of an external intelligence some twenty-six years later (1944), uses similar constructions. In the later poem, however, the optative commands are addressed not to the hypothetical god in the house, but to those who might admit him, including the poem's notional "I." What seems interesting in this context about the reappearance of this kind of poem is not so much the ambivalence of the repudiation of a divine being as the persistence of the impulse to represent a human figure and the consequent struggle against it.

The dramatization of the figural impulse as instinctual in both "Nuances" and "Less and Less Human" accords with our sense of Stevens as someone who enjoyed the authority that writing poetry affords; it seems like the almost automatic self-projection of an overweening ego. Hence, the struggle against that impulse seems to constitute a healthful, even ethical, corrective. For what is true of the gods as figures of otherness is equally true of the self: the worst kind of poet to be is "an obstruction, a man / Too exactly himself" (CP 310). One way of obviating the obstruction is through abstraction: at least, this is the method Stevens explicitly professes, the

first section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" being devoted to the setting forth of abstraction as a cleansing and enabling aesthetic. ("*It Must Be Abstract*," the prescription/conclusion goes; arguably, in figurative terms, "it" already is.) Another, complexly related, alternative is the construction of a collective being, a giant, the "secondary expositor" of "The Creations of Sound," the "major man" of "Notes" and "Repetitions of a Young Captain." Such constructions involve a pluralization of the self that has the effect of a dilution and (notionally, at least) an admixture with other selves. Note, however, that for all Stevens' assertions that these collective figures have the power to utter the purified language of the tribe, we do not hear them speak as it were in their *propriae personae*. There are also other, less overt techniques of disguising the self: for example, by using grammatical constructions that suggest the transcendence of agency, "As if the language suddenly, with ease, / Said things it had laboriously spoken" (CP 387). By contrast, most obviously of all, Stevens removes himself from center stage by declining to figure himself as "I": that is, as a traditional lyric subject. Instead, he tends to configure himself in dialogic constructions, or as part of a public ethos of the first personal plural, or in the third person constructions of histories, parables, and anecdotes. Once that jar has been placed in Tennessee, it seems to do all the work.

"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" contains a number of occasions of what we might call apocalyptic play. Stevens is much less explicit about what he is doing in these than he is about the topic of apocalypse in, say, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," where, after all, apocalypse is not just a concern but a central preoccupation. Nevertheless, these playful occasions in "Notes" trope on traditional images and ideas about revelation and about ending in ways that acknowledge their biblical source. Indeed, "*It Must Be Abstract*," as its ambiguous title implies, is as concerned with endings as much as beginnings. We might join the poem at canto vii, which represents a relaxation from effort, a kind of poetic sabbatical following six cantos of *rifacimento*, Stevens' trope of beginning.⁹ Appropriately, the concern is with the possibility of insights—that is, poetic *ends*—that just arrive, without being worked for, a conception that is very difficult for Stevens to accept, as we shall see.

The first move is for the trace of Franz Hals's self-projection, the faintly supernatural "giant of the weather" (CP 385) of the previous canto, to be reduced to a thinker of the first idea and banished. We are left in the natural world. Thinking perhaps of Wordsworth, whose moments of insight in *The Prelude* also occur after the cessation of considerable effort, the speaker here wonders whether the truth might not depend upon "a walk around a lake, / A composing as the body tires, . . . a stop to watch / A definition growing certain and / A wait within that certainty" that becomes "a rest" whose end is uncertain. This imaginative venture results in failure: the objection is to a decorum so extreme that it reduces nature to a kind of décor, to "swags of pine-trees bordering the lake" (CP 386). Stevens tries

again: "Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence," whose occurrence is as arbitrary as the interpretation of a cock crowing on the left as a sign that all is well, and as dubious. "[I]ncalculable balances" suggests a kind of performative rightness that is entirely consonant with "times of inherent excellence," but it also, if less obviously, suggests the diction of accounting. In the back of our mind we may begin to ask whether there are not totals to be summed up of a wholly different kind than those calculated by the banks of Switzerland, even as the metaphor changes to clockwork.

All of this is pervaded by profound unease, which perhaps does not become overt until the mention of "the machine [which] / Sets up its Schwärmerei" (CP 386). Indefinite rest in ornamental surroundings, a failure to read the signs (perhaps of one's own treachery), a question of accountability. . . . It becomes clear that the underlying concern is with death and judgment, and it is equally clear that what is in question is the venerable question of grace. For it is only grace that, against the odds, could make the sinister-crowing cock a sign of the rightness of things, that could make the balances come out right despite things not adding up, could enable love to triumph over circumstance. Stevens' ambivalence is extreme; he mistrusts grace precisely because it seems arbitrary, as a good poet must, one is here tempted to say, and certainly a poet schooled in Calvinist thought. But "a kind of Swiss perfection" may be, among other things, precisely that impossible possible: Calvin's axiomatically faulted humanity in a state of grace. More obviously, perhaps, it is also the perfection of Swiss clockwork, and the deistic conception of man's place in the scheme of things, introducing to the poem, at last, a contest between the light of reason and the light of revelation. Neither light prevails. Stevens shows his mistrust of the Divine Clockmaker by merging him with a *deus ex machina*, another source of seemingly impossible resolutions that amounts to an equivalent Schwärmerei (enthusiasm/fanaticism) to Calvinism.

Despite all of this ambivalence, Stevens ends this canto on a resolutely hopeful note. These are memorable lines, whose passionate hopefulness is largely a matter of gesture and rhetoric, and not unmixed with irony:

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist. (CP 386)

In this dream of truth, the final verdict would seem to be in favor of the divine light of revelation. Yet the blessed pair hardly seem aware of it except in relation to its antithesis. In a marvelous anticlimax, they behold . . . what? Only that which they have transcended, much in the way that Yeats's traveler to Byzantium could sing only of what was past, or passing, or to

come. Although the academies may be befogged, whether in ancient Athens or in Paris, they have at least provided structures to which to cleave amidst the prevailing obscurity. Bearing in mind the pervasive importance of Whitman to "Notes" as a whole, we might even surmise that the couple have taken their first steps toward their present elevation as *élèves* of those same academies. Parallels with the celebrated final numbered canto of "Notes" seem obvious: Stevens has retained Athens and Paris, the lovers, the image of the circle, and the language of revelation. Indeed, it may be that Stevens arrives at "Notes" III x through a reworking of this early canto, in the course of which he very nearly resolves the ambivalences that are not confronted anywhere else in the poem.

To what extent does Stevens' treatment of the figural in this canto conform to the pattern I have outlined? We begin with something like *propria persona*, with a self mentally conducting a walk around a lake. Despite that self's not figuring as "I," the perspective is surely his own consciousness: "a stop / To see hepatica, a stop to watch / A definition growing certain and / A wait within that certainty" (CP 386). If I am right about this, then the definition growing certain, whatever else it is, is also self-definition, and a wait within that certainty involves also weight or import. But then the perspective shifts and we leave the figure at rest among the pines, possibly all night if the cock crows when it is supposed to. Indeed, it begins to look as though he has conducted his own demise, composing as his body tires, then taking a rest from which he has not returned by morning. Fortunately, however, the intervention of the *deus ex machina* allows him to reappear, which he does, surely, as "a man," anonymous and representative: it is the union of the anonymous couple that earns him the use of the first person plural, and the authority accruing to it, in the last half of the canto. In sum: the canto has effected a translation of the individual self with its characteristic propensity for going round things (circumnavigation and circumscription and the pleasures of merely circulating) to the anonymous lover, awakening to a revelation of a higher truth. It is a sophisticated and accomplished process of abstraction of one's own self. Moreover, the return of the figural is associated with the language of revelation; indeed, the connection with the spousal tradition associated with the Book of Revelation is so easy to spot that it hardly needs specifying. Finally, the purification of the returning figure is accomplished through violence, which is not just a matter of the clash of various systems of thought—that is, after all, merely dialectic and any meditation of sufficient substance has to engage in it—but a matter simply of the annihilation of the individual self. The supernatural giant is banished, the self as creature of nature takes a well deserved rest, the mechanized residuum, which is also a version of the self (the equivalent of Yeats's golden nightingale), and whose music is thus very "familiar" indeed, sets in motion a rendezvous that has all the romance of a meeting of two figures on a cuckoo clock. I have said that the figural returns as "a man," but perhaps it would

be more accurate to say that it returns in plural form, as both “a man and a woman.” The inevitable next question is the gender of the voice, since there is only one, that speaks on behalf of both lovers. That is the voice of poetic authority.

The final two cantos of *“It Must Be Abstract”* are a pair, sharing imagery and concerns. Both are apocalyptic, and in both the revelation of the hidden is associated with the return of the figural. We have to set aside the question of gender, at least temporarily, to make sense of Stevens’ logic in the final canto:

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular. . . . (CP 388)

This blithe elision of the feminine is, however, surprisingly brief: a note of anxiety about gender is registered in the second tercet, where major man is referred to as “More fecund as principle than particle, / Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force. . . .” Males are generally not referred to as “fecund”; that word is reserved for females whose fertility is perceived as an aspect of a (feminized) landscape (e.g., Cleopatra and the Nile; cf. “my green, my fluent mundo”). In conjunction with “flor-abundant,” however, the feminized language seems Chaucerian, a continuation, indeed, of the Chaucerian diction of the previous canto (“My dame, sing for this person accurate songs”).¹⁰ In the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, the young Squire has “lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse” (l. 81), and

Embrouded was he, as it were a meede
Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede. (ll. 89–90)

In fact, Chaucer’s Squire is as precise a depiction of the figure of the youth as virile poet as Stevens could possibly want. It seems suggestive to both cantos that this “lusty bachelor” (l. 80)—that is, an apprentice knight, not yet a knight banneret, equivalent, indeed, of an ephebe—should already be a veteran of battles “In Flaundes, in Artoys, and Pycardie.” In canto ix major man’s origin is represented as combative: he is the product of reason, of the “applied / Enflashings” of the “invincible foils” of dialectic. At the same time, like a jewel, he is studied at midnight, and like an infant “Swaddled in reverie” and “reposes / On a breast forever precious for that touch” (CP 388). This revised annunciation accommodates a chivalric mix of the martial arts (“foils” suggest an apprentice-figure, being for fencing, not actual duels) and the erotic. Indeed, it seems deliberately Freudian in its welding of the language of repression of the transgressive (“The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind, / Hidden from other thoughts” [CP 388]) to the revelatory mechanism of apocalypse. The “breast forever precious for that touch” is that of lover and mother. It is surely also the earth, for whom the good of April falls as rain in a possible allusion to Chaucer, as

the apprentice-swordsman merges into actual soldier, only to die. The soldier not only "reposes on [that] breast forever," but his doing so makes the earth "forever precious." Hence, it may be for the soldier that the "good of April falls tenderly" (CP 388), even as he himself falls. That is why, I think, in the following canto he is represented as having become one with the ground of being, "fecund" and "flor-abundant," a Whitmanian move that demonstrates the accomplishment of the principle of abstraction through a loss of figural form, replication, and depersonalization. Only by entrusting the fallen soldier to the care of the earth ("accurate" deriving ultimately from *cura*, "care," via *accuratus*, "done carefully") can the speaker effect a cure (from the same Latin root) for the incurable. This takes the form of a kind of linguistic resurrection. For major man is not "that person," but "this person," for whom the cock-birds' calling at the time of sex/death turns out to be also the annunciation of a new dawn. He is reborn into the linguistic order as a "foundling of the infected past," a revenant of that past, purified through death.¹¹ Bereft of parents and their complicating doctrines, he is a kind of *secundum mobile*, "So moving in the manner of his hand" (CP 388). Yet he is not quite, I think, lacking in antecedents, since the sight of his "colored eyes" is as dangerous to the clairvoyance of those who apprehend him as are the "flashing eyes [and] floating hair" of his romantic cousin Kubla Khan.

Canto x begins as impersonally as an algebraic statement, yet we soon hear the poetry pressing toward conclusion, detect a triumphant necessity informing the rapid logical computation of the first three stanzas. It is as if Stevens had abbreviated the working out of a difficult equation: "The major abstraction is the idea of man / And major man is its exponent, abler / In the abstract than in his singular, / More fecund as principle than particle, . . . In being more than an exception, part, / Though an heroic part, of the commonal. / The major abstraction is the commonal" (CP 388). This is not merely logical, but mechanical; what we are listening to is surely the spinning of the disengaged mechanism, the "familiar music of the machine" of canto vii reworked as a kind of logical impetus that, insofar as it seems also a way of generating or maintaining *rhetorical* energy, seems very closely allied with poetic form itself. We might think of this as a form of the *machina* out of which we can expect the *deus* to speak, effecting, in Stevens' reversal, not an implausible but a wonderful if unlikely solution. I cannot, however, read "The inanimate, difficult visage" (CP 388) satisfactorily, and must spin wheels myself: inanimate because abstracted from nature, yet, paradoxically, a visage (and hence gendered); inanimate rather than inscrutable, perhaps, because human, not divine; inanimate, perhaps, because masked, which would lead naturally to the question of its identity. Or inanimate simply because dead and difficult to look upon as the faces of dead soldiers, considered collectively as one face. This last interpretation would fit in with major man's being "more than an exception," if the exception were Christ. Major man's heroic sacrifice, no

longer individual, would be part of the commonal insofar as it partakes of a wider cause or even the universal human fate. Leaving aside the dubious morality inherent in this reasoning, if my last interpretation stands, then the pattern established in other cantos would suggest that Stevens has prepared the ground for the inevitable return of the figural. In fact we can see that magic taking place with the next words, the unmistakable turning of the abstract into the figural in the form of the question, "Who is it?," where "it" is not yet "he."¹²

The grammar of question and question here is complexly ambiguous. At first, the questions "What rabbi . . .? What chieftain . . .?" (CP 389) seem like extensions of that first question, "Who is it?" and seem to point to the composite figure himself. However, it transpires that the rabbi and the chieftain are but witnesses, perhaps seers, of that composite figure. The questioning turns out to be as much about their mode of seeing as about what, or whom, they see, the answer to the first question being deferred until the penultimate stanza ("It is he"). Both rabbi and chieftain are leaders; in that sense they represent their peoples, which is a somewhat different sense of representativeness from that of major man, who literally embodies the commonality. Yet the semantic slippage inherent in that term "representative" may be instructive; it would seem that the leader-figures are essential to the functioning of major man, who needs others to speak on his behalf in order to make himself heard. At least, that is the answer suggested by this canto to canto viii, where the MacCullough may be MacCullough without it following that major man is man. Rabbis are for Stevens figures of detachment, among other things. (In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the rabbi engaged in "lordly study" of man who "proved a gobbet in [his] mincing world" [CP 17]). The sense of being beyond ordinary human experience is signalled in this final canto of "It Must Be Abstract," but so is its opposite, for it may be that the rabbi's customary equanimity is destroyed by his strength of feeling. If the rabbi is engaged in the scholarly study of humanity in the abstract, then the chieftain, amalgamating the MacCullough with Native American tradition, is engaged in the particular, being preoccupied by the particular outcomes of the various battle strategies he has employed. Both leaders are said to "see . . . separate figures one by one, / And yet see only one" (CP 389), which is a combination of their modes of perception, while we as readers are allowed to glimpse only the collective version: Stevens supplies no referent (or referents) for those separate figures. It seems clear that he wishes to signify the collective figure as a type; indeed, it would be hard to find a more succinct definition of one. The composite figure himself, in his "slouching pantaloons" (CP 389), not only has the commonal status of a *commedia* clown, but also suggests more direct ancestral figures. Franz Hals surely reappears here, and those pantaloons suggest another, literary, antecedent in Rip Van Winkle, fiction of "Dietrich Knickerbocker" and wearer of "galligaskins." In his reawakened state, Rip's definitive activity was "Look-

ing for what was, where it used to be" (CP 389), and it seems fitting that Stevens should amalgamate the "Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force" (CP 388) with Washington Irving, whose two most famous American sketches center on the celebration of landscape.

Stevens' composite figure is, above all, a figure of salvage: the permitted residuum of the figural impulse, purged by abstraction, decreed, made to disappear, and, in his return, a figure of irreducible triumph. It is a triumph handled lightly: the clownish dress, appropriate for a comic figure (literally a creature of happy endings) suggests a connection with the circus animals of canto v; the ephebe's task in relation to him is analogous to a circus trick with animals. Yet he is surely as much as the ephebe one of the "heroic children whom time breeds" (CP 385), a discharged soldier, subject of the chieftain's cries.

Notwithstanding, he is not, I think, a self-conscious figure (of triumph or anything else). We see him side on, as it were, in what seems very much like a mistaken search, as, for example, for an old order in which God appears in his customary daytime cloud (Exodus, 13:12 and 34:5). He seems not yet to be aware, or to exist in a condition of perpetual unawareness, of the old order's having disappeared; he seems not to know that his presence itself constitutes the sun. The particular usefulness of the ephebe figure becomes apparent here. In his apprentice status he avoids the burden of leadership borne by chieftain or rabbi; as a son-figure himself, and as an apprentice soldier, he shares something with the composite figure. Yet, at the same time, he constitutes a kind of third term in conjunction with the rabbi and chieftain, not just because he shares their vision of a communal figure, but also because of a burden of his own: his whole endeavor as apprentice-poet is to acquire the language appropriate to the preeminence of this emblem of the commonalty. Major man derives his being from the rabbi and chieftain—his existence depends on their seeing him—but the ephebe's special task is to establish his preeminence in the public arena through language.

It is clear that this canto is an answer and a complement to canto i, since it is here that the sun reappears, with full revelatory force. In a sense canto i is the template for this section, as it is for canto vii, and the model of the pattern that characterizes "*It Must Be Abstract*" as a whole. "The death of one god is the death of all" (CP 381), Stevens intones (anticipating the spotting of the returning figures "one by one / And yet see[ing] only one"), and proceeds to put the gods to death, albeit prayerfully: "Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest, / Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber." Although the outmoded gods do not return, a resurrection of a kind takes place in the linguistic order. Stevens' emphatic prescription is that "the sun / Must bear no name," whereupon the irrepressible figural impulse is glimpsed, in chimeric form: "gold flourisher." The "difficulty of what it is to be" (CP 381) is not just the difficulty of existing without names, but the difficulty of what it is yet to become, an ambiguity that

requires a sort of imaginative bifurcation in the reader, since in one reading, the sun shines more brightly, being cleansed of defunct associations, while in another, we are required to wait patiently in the dark until it is time for that transformed sun to reappear.

A complete investigation of the revelatory language of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" would entail readings of cantos viii and ix of "*It Must Change*" and cantos i and vii of "*It Must Give Pleasure*." Nevertheless, I hope it is clear by now that the whole poem can be read as a kind of extended "nuances of a theme," whose various cantos speak to and rework one another, rather than follow logically upon one another. For example, the final numbered canto, III x is, I have suggested, a reworking of canto I vii, and canto I x is at least an answer to canto I v. Moreover, it should also be clear that the effect of one canto's answering another is not entirely irrelevant to the theme established in "*It Must Be Abstract*." The language of revelation seems to me very nearly as prominent as the language of origins in this section of "Notes." Both kinds of diction invite us to consider the predominant pattern of the cantos in theological terms, not just in terms of linguistic renovation. The typical pattern conforms strikingly to the pattern of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the latter being combined, invariably, with the language of revelation. The effect of this *rifacimento* is of universal destruction answering individual sacrifice, like an echo amplified. It is as if the Crucifixion prefigured the destruction of Revelation, and the Resurrection prefigured not the general resurrection described in the Book of Revelation, but the preservation of the virtuous. At the center of Stevens' *rifacimento* lies a reworking of the concept of representativeness, whereby Christ's emblematic status is replaced by a democratically conceived composite substitute. This quintessentially Emersonian project of democratization should not, however, be confused with egalitarianism, since it is clear that the composite figure of the son relies on devoted communal representatives, whether these play the role of the father, as do the rabbi and the chieftain, or the role of the son, as does the poet-ephebe.

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Notes

¹The various meanings of the word *figura* and their development through time are discussed by Erich Auerbach in his well-known essay (first pub. in German in 1938 and in Ralph Manheim's English translation 1944). As an aspect of prosopopoeia, the figural impulse is related to voice, and hence to the long-running debate about voice as an index to alterity in Stevens' poetry. Cf Hugh Kenner's assertion that there are no people in Stevens' poetry (75), and Gerald L. Bruns's development of this assertion in his discussion of *écriture* as a defensive technique against the voices of others. More recently, Mark Halliday argues that Stevens' reflexive solitude diminishes his overall poetic achievement.

²At least one other critic has made the connection between Stevens' poetry and Vitruvian Man. A. Richard Turner has called the chapter of his book in which the illustration of Vitruvian Man appears "A Blessed Rage for Order" (210 ff).

³Connections between some Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist representations of the afterlife and Christian representations of it are convincingly argued by Richard Cavendish. See especially the illustration on 48. For illustrations of multilimbed gods of the dead, see 33.

⁴I am indebted for the interpretation of Fludd's illustration to Joscelyn Godwin (69).

⁵Alexander Roob's chapter on "Microcosm" contains a large number of illustrations from various traditions, all of which image a representative human figure as male.

⁶This is hardly surprising given the imagery of eccentricity in the preceding canto. Indeed, even in the poems in which Stevens has seemed to Harold Bloom and others to come closest to solipsism—without yielding to it—poems such as "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" or "The Idea of Order at Key West," as in the poems to which the idea of centrality is fundamental, such as "Anecdote of the Jar," Stevens tends to problematize the whole notion of a center. For Bloom's critique of Stevens' mistrust of solipsism, see *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, 94.

⁷Some of this evidence occurs, of course, in the canto itself. Defensive moves include the impulse to hold her to herself, rather than embrace her, and the anti-romanticism of being *flicked* by feeling.

⁸Williams' short lyric "El Hombre" was first published in *Al Que Quieri!* in 1917.

⁹Stevens' first draft of what became "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" bore the title "REFACIMENTO" (L 431).

¹⁰In Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," the cockerel Chauntecleer addresses Pertelote as "Madame."

¹¹I cannot help hearing Williams' "road to the contagious hospital" here, which would be an appropriate allusion in the light of "Spring and All's" theme of rebirth.

¹²I am acutely aware of the dubiousness of ascribing a dubious morality to Stevens on the basis of some lines that I cannot read fully. Notwithstanding, my interpretation of Stevens' view of the soldier's partaking in a wider, common fate, in an argument in which the crucial question of agency is completely elided, is congruent with my sense of his argument in the "coda" of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the poem that begins, "Soldier, there is a war between the mind / And sky" (CP 407).

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"Gusts of Great Enkindlings": Spectral Apocalypse in "The Auroras of Autumn"

MICHAEL HOBBS

IN *FORMS OF FAREWELL*, Charles Berger has dealt at length with the idea that "The Auroras of Autumn" is an apocalyptic poem. At the beginning of his chapter titled "Boreal Night: An Apocalyptic Reading of 'The Auroras of Autumn,'" Berger points out that "Stevens uses all the rhetorical resources of the apocalyptic tradition (an odd phrase), but these are reimagined, reinvested, through his own sense of being witness to the present moment's threat" (36). The present moment was, of course, 1947 with all of the memories of a recently ended world war and the advent of an atomic age still hanging in the air. Stevens responds to this, as Berger demonstrates, by including a powerful apocalyptic voice in "Auroras," but part of the "reimagined, reinvested" element of the poem resides in another voice that runs counter to or evades the dire pronouncements of apocalypse. There are, in other words, contending voices at work in "Auroras": a voice of recovery in the form of an antiapocalyptic prophet and a voice of doom predicting an end, if not to the world, at least to poetry and its relevance in such a violent and destructive milieu. That multiple voices speak in Stevens' poetry may not seem very surprising, though some critics have claimed that Stevens' poems are quite monological.¹ But what is quite significant, and rather scantily treated in Stevens criticism, is the idea that part of the polyphony of voices that occurs in Stevens takes the form of a characterized readership.² I want to suggest, in this discussion, that the antiapocalyptic voice, the prophet who resists endings in "Auroras," is one of numerous characterized-reader voices that appear repeatedly in Stevens' work. The antiapocalyptic prophet, by evading the formal closure that "Auroras's" voice of doom is intent on fashioning, exhibits the kind of imaginative interaction that Stevens desires of his own readership.

As one might expect at the end of an extraordinarily devastating world war, "Auroras's" voice of doom soberly discloses an end AND foretells the finish of the poetic enterprise; his every utterance carries within itself a cataclysmic reverberation. He bespeaks the bright white, incandescent glare of finality, and it is against this finality that the antiapocalyptic prophet struggles, insisting upon continuance, defiantly breaking the white opac-

ity of the poem's last moment into a spectrally colorful futurity that defers all absolute conclusions. Ironically, the two voices cannot escape dialogic exchange, and the result of their radical contention is a severe and complicated crisis of interaction. "Auroras" depicts this crisis as an unceasing and strenuous struggle between powerful imaginations, each wrestling elusively to liberate itself from intercourse with the other.

Bakhtin's figurative discussion of dialogism as a type of refraction helps delineate the resultant language of this clash between extreme voices:

If we imagine the *intention* of . . . a word, that is, its *directionality toward the object*, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself (as would be the case in the play of an image-as-trope, in poetic speech taken in the narrow sense, in an "autotelic word"), but rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle. (277)

The antiapocalyptic prophet distorts the poem's apocalyptic ray-words; his dialogic evasiveness "makes the facets of the image sparkle" as his own words bend away from the voice of doom. The antiapocalyptic prophet does not deride or parody the language of apocalypse, but instead disperses its belated finality into a spectral futurity, recovering it from its own "self-defeat" as James Longenbach calls the achievement of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "I think we could best appreciate the power of Stevens's finest work by thinking of its point as the self-defeat of poetry. In saying so, I do not mean to diminish in any way that poetry's power, its verbal delights, its fabulous confections, and its visionary ecstasies" (265). For Longenbach, this self-defeat indicates the poem's realization of the extraordinary within the ordinary or "the wonder of the common world" (264). But beyond this realization of the ordinary through the poem's self-defeat, a crisis takes place between contending imaginations that transfigure the terrain of "Auroras."

The crisis of interaction between the voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet is apparent from "Auroras's" beginning canto. Flicking his uncanny, silent, beckoning tongue, the serpent of the opening canto personifies the poem's contending utterances, which "wriggle out of" the control of each voice, as the antiapocalyptic prophet and the voice of doom transgress each other's linguistic territory. For Harold Bloom, death is "the ultimate meaning of the serpent of the *Auroras* . . . because the serpent is the emblem of the necessity of change and the final form of change is

one's own death" (256). But for Stevens, there is no "final form of change" as long as one's poetry is kept vital, and part of that vitality lies in the antiapocalyptic prophet's evasive contention within the arena of the poem. Leggett comes close to this type of endlessly elaborating contention when he says

The difficulty in Stevens's cyclical conception of creativity is that the vitality of any specific work of art is short-lived, doomed from the moment of its birth. The optimistic note is that the world of change transcends any attempt to fix it in particular works, so that the cycles need never end. There is no point at which readers have sufficient poetry or at which poets are content with the poems of the past. (128)

As an emblem of the poem's contending utterances, the serpent's textual volutions not only create gaps for the antiapocalyptic prophet and the voice of doom to struggle over but also fashion a discussion of those gaps as they open. Every vague indefinite pronoun—"This is where the serpent lives"—provides an arena for the struggle, a potential textual break through which each can elude the other and "wriggl[e] out of the egg" (CP 411).³ The serpent's tip—the end of its head, the tongue flicking from its mouth, or perhaps the point of its tail—is also its swift tilt or sway that leaves the antiapocalyptic prophet staring at the voice of doom's finished, final text. But the tip is also a hint or trace that lies camouflaged in the suggestiveness of language, inviting the antiapocalyptic prophet to elude the text's finality by dispersing the voice of doom's meaning.

The resulting textual contention admits an almost terrifying, side-winding evasiveness into lines or even single words (such as "tip") that branch into myriad paths of labyrinthine meaning and that fail to provide either the voice of doom or the antiapocalyptic prophet with any sure sense of direction.⁴ Instead they enforce a relationship of agonistic evasion, one in which the antiapocalyptic prophet must continually disperse the voice of doom's every utterance about finality ("the end of the cave" or "the body's slough," for example) into spectral sleights of imagination. On the one hand, the rhetorical stance of canto I's second stanza implies that the modern poem may be merely a repeat of what has gone before. The voice of doom's effort—his latest, autumnal aurora—is simply "another bodiless for the body's slough," another belated version of the apocalyptic end of the body and its resurrection into the bodiless. The representation of this convention implies as well the ossification of poetry and thus its own end. On the other hand, the "not-quite-rhetorical"⁵ side of the question—"is this . . . Another bodiless for the body's slough?"—provokes the antiapocalyptic prophet to resist the doomsday language. As one side of the dialogically agonistic pair, the antiapocalyptic prophet's resisting imagination, perpetually postponing completion, provides a place for the ever-

renewing poem, which sloughs off its old skin to reveal its glistening new surface of words. Poetry is no longer a place where a single voice can console itself; instead, it is “where the serpent lives,” a future “nest” furnished by the “tinted distances” of the prophet’s dispersing, evasive imagination.

As serpent, the poem’s contending utterances act out “form gulping after formlessness.” Vendler writes that “This changeable serpent lives in present participles, gulping, wriggling, flashing, and emerging,” but “the true genius of the poem” (250) is not so much the participial undulations of the poem as the depicted collisions of its voices, where the voice of doom’s form hungrily and aggressively pursues the formlessness of the antiapocalyptic prophet’s unrestrained imagination, his desired freedom of formless evasion. Paradoxically, if form engulfs formlessness or if formlessness completely eludes form, the poem collapses either into complete ossification or utter nonsense. Ironically, both the voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet gulp with fear during their exchange, the one terror-stricken at narrowly avoiding the chaos of formlessness, the other frightened by the consequences of a fully finished form. This double impulse embodies the dilemma that Stevens’ poetry confronts and that his imagined reader’s evasive maneuvering helps him solve. His aesthetic involves both a veering away from and an intense pursuit of form, as suggested by “Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances” (CP 411). Apocalyptic ray-words flash swiftly toward the antiapocalyptic prophet, a speedy pursuit that threatens to overpower him, if unwary, as the voice of doom attempts to form the final word on his subject. But as those words pass through the prism that is the antiapocalyptic prophet’s imagination, their finality glitters into the undulant unpredictability of “the serpent body flashing without the skin” (CP 411), the poem shedding its own imaginative layers to reveal and then re-veil nuances of meaning.

To lend them their full power, their fleshed and flashing impact, such dispersions of the poem’s end rely on the imaginative agonistics of dialogic evasion between the voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet. Their disputed terrain is the poem’s locus of apocalypse—its “wished-for disappearances”—never quite fully achieved, and out of their consequent imaginative agonistics arises the poem’s serpentine shedding of skin after skin, each the continuation of a new birth of the imagination:

These lights may finally attain a pole
In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,

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

The “master of the maze” applies as appropriately to the antiapocalyptic prophet as to the voice of doom, each poised before the other’s imagina-

tion. The poem is the distillate—"his poison"—that results from the face-off between the voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet at the "pole / In the midmost midnight," each always already furnishing "another nest" for the "master of the maze." As Lisa Steinman has pointed out, "Stevens' aim was to keep the cycle of imagination, which moves to construct, reject, and reconstruct orders, in motion in his language" (141). This process of creation keeps each in pursuit of the other, a pursuit that is also each opponent's attempt to evade the other always in possession: "This is his poison: that we should disbelieve / Even that" (CP 411). The repeated *that* represents the agonistic circularity within which the antiapocalyptic prophet and the voice of doom turn, disbelieving, yet maintaining an infernal faithfulness as each gazes on the other's sleights of motion. Both awake while circling each other over the meditating serpent, the emblem of the text where their imaginative agonistics occur:

His meditations in the ferns,
When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,

Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,
Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
The moving grass, the Indian in his glade. (CP 411–12)

Each exchanges places with the other in a convolving struggle of creativity, a match that is both a poison and a poise, a futility as well as a balancing in the beauty of the poem.

With a good-bye wave of his hand in cantos II, III, and IV, the voice of doom forecasts the end of "an idea" and begins to contemplate the whiteness of such an end. Bloom writes, "'Farewell to an idea' is a dirge of Wordsworthian dimensions, a lament here not for an absent gleam but for the driving away of tropes and colors by the glare of the auroras" (261). But the whiteness that so thoroughly dominates canto II (white is repeated seven times in twenty-four lines) scatters into a spectral magnificence of color at the canto's end. The voice of doom's empty cabin and barren beach become loci of exploration for the antiapocalyptic prophet, a shifting terrain between land and sea where poise is difficult. The voice of doom's disclosed finality resides in the white of a denuded terrain, similar to "the nothing that is" (CP 10) of "The Snow Man":

A cabin stands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence
Of an infinite course. (CP 412)

Whiteness is an emblem of cataclysmic vacancy, here, an apocalyptic convention upon which the voice of doom relies for the successful finaliza-

tion of his dirge, but the antiapocalyptic prophet disrupts the “ancestral theme,” enkindling a colorful continuation of unconventional ideas.

The voice of doom’s struggle is powerful; not only are his cabin walls and beach white, but “The flowers against the wall / Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark / Reminding, trying to remind, of a white / That was different” (CP 412). The flowers are the voice of doom’s conventional inscription—“a kind of mark”—that is “trying to remind,” but the antiapocalyptic prophet has already disturbed conventional exchange to such a degree that memory fails to recognize “a white / That was different.” Belated apocalypse suggests cataclysmic vacancy instead of cataclysmic resurrection; it is “the white of an aging afternoon” (CP 412) that both provokes and already seems to reflect the antiapocalyptic prophet’s resistance. The insufficiency of “ancestral themes” necessitates his elusive struggle, which in turn awakens the belated strength of the voice of doom, and their collision disperses final white into continuing color. Their imaginative agonistics disrupt conventional exchange and refresh the creative process.

The voice of doom’s attempts to finalize his imaginative project grow desperately more voiceless and deserted as he struggles to elude the antiapocalyptic prophet. The wind blowing freely through the cabin suggests a dilapidated shelter, and as the canto progresses, the terrain grows whiter before it begins to dim:

Here, being visible is being white,
Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment
Of an extremist in an exercise . . .

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

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall. (CP 412)

“[T]he solid of white” marks “the accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise . . .,” the voice of doom’s most strenuous attempt at closure. As “The long lines of [the poem] grow longer, emptier,” the gathering darkness suggests the dialogic evasions of contending imaginations encountering each other within the poem. Thus, instead of an ossified finality of achievement, an elusive and momentary poise occurs between darkness and whiteness, at which point the antiapocalyptic prophet appears: “The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand” (CP 412). His walking is a dialogic perambulation of power, a blank turning that both eludes and is eluded.

Bloom misses the powerful doubling effect that “turns blankly” has when he writes, “To turn blankly is to trope vainly or write poetry without purpose, in a state of ‘This is,’ where the wind and the auroras domi-

nate and the wind and auroras themselves are allied as 'gusts of great enkindlings' " (264). On the contrary, the wind and the auroras *provide* the agonistic arena for the dialogic evasions between the voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet. The prophet is blank and thus powerfully unscribed as he veers, but he also "turns blankly" as if baffled, lost, jarred by the estranging "frigid brilliances" that are a product of the collision between himself and the voice of doom. Still, he manages to achieve an agonistic poise at that important position of exchange on the beach, where footing is precarious but also allows easy shifting of directions. As the antiapocalyptic prophet encounters the voice of doom's frozen "north," he disperses, in his "turn," the voice of doom's white poem into a text that

is always enlarging the change,

With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,
The color of ice and fire and solitude. (*CP* 412–13)

The antiapocalyptic prophet's "alien words, value judgments, and accents" (Bakhtin 277) color the voice of doom's white finality with the blue, red, and green of his (the antiapocalyptic prophet's) "spectral dispersion."

To provide a contrast to the antiapocalyptic prophet, canto III characterizes the interaction between the voice of doom and his more orthodox believers brooding upon "The purpose of the poem":

The mother's face,
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.
They are together, here, and it is warm,

With none of the prescience of oncoming dreams,
It is evening. (*CP* 413)

The voice of doom's believers gaze into and indeed through the "mother's face" to the primal origin of beauty in the transcendent experience. Such meditative activity creates the illusion of a presence that dispels the emptiness of the room as well as the difficulties of the poem, the "here" with its gap-ridden language.

The voice of doom's believers find consolation in the presence of the mother figure: "It is the mother they possess, / Who gives transparency to their present peace" (*CP* 413). Such consolation and placidity come out of a resurrectional comfort in the visionary interaction that offers apocalyptic reassurance about the transcendent beauty of the universe, which is incarnate in the mother's face or felt in the touch of inspiration derived from her supernatural qualities. As the reassured believers gaze at her, face-to-face, their experience of transparency rocks them into an almost childlike reliance and solace. Their faith relies upon sharing established tropes of transcendent apocalypse, instead of challenging those tropes

through a mutually evasive contention of imaginations, and this leaves them vulnerable. As if comfort has numbed their awareness, they do not possess “the prescience of oncoming dreams.”

Heedless of the deadliness of modern apocalypse bereft of its comforts in resurrection, canto III’s believers essentially lack evasive techniques in a violent and threatening world. The consolation (and imaginative quiet) resulting from their transparent mystical vision of the mother leaves them “With none of the prescience” necessary for the survival of the imagination in apocalyptic vacancy. The believers’ reliance upon the tropes of transcendent apocalypse—the figurations of resurrection and transcendence after a cataclysmic end—fails, whereas “Auroras’s” dialogically evasive contention between the imaginations of the antiapocalyptic prophet and voice of doom constitutes an unending reevaluation of those tropes in order to survive. Leggett comes as close as any Stevens critic to describing this idea of dialogic evasion:

The scholar, the man of imagination “separately dwelling,” must . . . feel everything for himself if he is to discover the personalia uniquely his. To phrase this in terms of Stevens’s version of the history of the imagination, we may say that if succeeding generations of poets feed only on the past, ignoring the principle of flux that is the life of the imagination, they produce only diminished versions of the geography of the dead and bring about the death of poetry. (58)

“Auroras” valorizes a dialogic contention between the voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet that is a function not of transparency but of evasion. In contrast, the voice of doom’s conventional believers rely on a tradition that is “still-starred,” central, bright, and mystically illuminating, yet finally numbing in its consoling presence. Instead of evasion, possession is the most important consideration for the voice of doom’s believers—“It is the mother they possess”—but “Auroras’s” apocalyptic vacancy eventually reveals the mother’s decrepitude. Her transparency transmutes into something ghostly and phantasmagorical:

And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed.
She gives transparency. But she has grown old.
The necklace is a carving not a kiss.

The soft hands are a motion not a touch. (*CP* 413)

With the mother’s transcendent power diminished, the voice of doom’s believers embrace a gaunt and withered figure, thus becoming a part of “the geography of the dead.”

The mother “has grown old” and “the house is of the mind and they and time, / Together, all together” (*CP* 413). Though there is consolation

in their conventional communion, the believers, in their comfort, remain unaware of the cataclysmic vacancy of modern apocalypse: "Boreal night / Will look like frost as it approaches them" (CP 413). In the midst of this fatal cold, the inhabitants of the crumbling house merely say "good-night, good-night." Their faith in boreal night as a "good-night" demonstrates a lack of the dialogic evasion necessary to create a durable "shelter of the mind." Instead, their "windows will be lighted, not the rooms" (CP 413), suggesting a profoundly quiet inner darkness, a lack of interactivity that might provide for an imaginative evasion of "A wind" that "will spread its windy grandeurs round / And knock like a rifle-butt against the door" (CP 414). Such a wind—and the modern apocalyptic poem that takes that wind into account—is threatening and devastatingly confusing to believers reliant upon the unchanged and unchanging tropes of transcendent apocalypse. Without a new birth of the imagination in dialogic evasion, "The wind will command them with invincible sound" (CP 414).

Unlike the believers who *gaze quietly* at the mother in canto III, the anti-apocalyptic prophet struggles, in canto IV, to *become actively* the father, forcefully asserting his will from the beginning of the canto: "The cancellings, / The negations are never final" (CP 414). As long as the cancellings and negations "are never final," the antiapocalyptic prophet's evasions continue to be an ongoing project that must not end with the voice of doom's words on the page. The antiapocalyptic prophet grapples with the voice of doom's gestures of finality, and the resulting struggle (not the actual victory of the antiapocalyptic prophet or the voice of doom, since neither overcomes the other) perpetually refreshes the poem.

The father of canto IV embodies the poem's disputed locus of authority, and for all the antiapocalyptic prophet's efforts at wresting power from the voice of doom, he cannot gain full possession. Instead, the father exhibits characteristics of both the voice of doom ("in saying yes he says farewell") and the antiapocalyptic prophet ("He measures the velocities of change" [CP 414]). The father embodies the very process of collision between the voice of doom's white light of finality and the antiapocalyptic prophet's colorful dispersion of final words into continuously creative language.

Blending chameleon-like into the apocalyptic landscape (is it the surrounding space or the father that is "of bleak regard" and "strong in the bushes"?), the antiapocalyptic prophet resides in the voice of doom's belated impoverishment. He is "strong in the bushes of his eyes" (CP 414) as if his strength depends upon his ability to disguise himself in the surrounding underbrush. The power of the antiapocalyptic prophet's camouflage partly derives from his skill in sleight-of-phrase: "He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell." The baffled reaction of critics such as Berger to the father provide ample evidence of his elusive character:

He seems, indeed, massively irrelevant. His function as judge or statuesque oracle is described in odd terms: "He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell." These are opaque lines, and the only sense I can make of them is that the father's voice, unlike his rigid countenance, is internalized in much the same manner as the voice of the superego, a voice synonymous with conscience. (51)

But the father is not simply "statuesque" and "rigid." He also "measures the velocities of change" by participating in the active dialogism that fashions the interaction in "Auroras."

The father's seemingly arbitrary responses are supremely evasive, but note also that they are dialogic: to an uttered no or yes he responds with no or yes (or sometimes "yes / To no"). The answers, as clipped and orthodox as they seem to be, suggest transgressive utterances, especially when the "no to no and yes to yes" eventually transmute into elaborate and elusive repetitions of the ritual exchange: "He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly / Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames" (CP 414). The lines masquerade as a comic appraisal of the father's abilities, but beneath the buffoonery hides the transmutation of the simple yes/no dialogism of stanza two; "He says no to no and yes to yes" becomes "He leaps from heaven to heaven." These simultaneously silly and powerful acrobatics look forward to a further elusive response that is just as silly and just as powerful: "He assumes the great speeds of space and flutters them / From cloud to cloudless, cloudless to keen clear / In flights of eye and ear" (CP 414). But this most elaborate dialogism is qualified by the fact that "now he sits in quiet and green-a-day." Relaxing in his colorful "green-a-day" paradise regained, the antiapocalyptic prophet's rest resembles the quiet repose of the conventional believers in canto III, who enjoy a numbing comfort while the violence of the "naked wind" beats its rifle-butt rhythms on the door.

Instead of remaining at ease, the antiapocalyptic prophet moves spectrally from "cloud to cloudless, cloudless to keen clear / In flights of eye and ear." He is unpredictable, and his most powerful evasion—his "yes / To no"—occurs when he disperses the opacity of white clouds into the clarity of blue sky. The father's "highest eye" suggests the antiapocalyptic prophet's prismatic discernment (a perceiving in all directions simultaneously) that belongs as well to "the deep ear" of his listening when "At evening . . . it hears / The supernatural preludes of its own" (CP 414). This type of refractive perception is the supreme moment of evasion, the prophet's awakening *in* and awakening *of* the voice of doom's imaginative strength. As antiapocalyptic prophet, the father's powerful evasions become the motivating force behind the strength of the voice of doom; thus, the antiapocalyptic prophet gives birth to the voice of doom. The "angelic eye" of the antiapocalyptic prophet "defines / Its actors approach-

ing, in company, in their masks" (CP 414), and the voice of doom is one of that masked company, invoking the "angelic eye" at the end of the canto:

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

Profound, and yet the king and yet the crown,
Look at this present throne. What company,
In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?
(CP 414–15)

"This present throne" reverberates ironically against "Auroras's" impoverished terrain, and the reverberation demands the most severe of evasions if the imagination is to survive. A new company of contending imaginations must consider postwar America's apocalyptic terrain as a part of poetry, as well as a part of its creative process. The company's contending imaginations compete not only among themselves but also against the rifle-butt cadences of the wind; *they* must "choir it with the naked wind." The voice of doom and the antiapocalyptic prophet must finally sing the *itness* of their disputed arena, and this can be accomplished, if at all, by the supreme effort of mutually elusive exchange.

Although there is not enough space here to map the struggle between these two voices throughout "Auroras," each seems to gain the upper hand at one point or another in the poem. In the final canto, the antiapocalyptic prophet, reinvigorated by the voice of doom's powerful resurgence, attempts once again to disrupt and disperse the finality pointed to by the voice of doom in his "great shadow's last embellishment" (CP 419) at the end of canto IX. In a comic exhortation, which undermines the solemn finality of the voice of doom's "simplest word" (CP 420), the antiapocalyptic prophet urges the rabbi (a comic and indeed more sympathetic version of the voice of doom) to examine "the phases" or spectral variations of a world that has certainly not ended. The antiapocalyptic prophet presents each possible phase, voicing the rabbi's anticipated objections to its weakness and finally returns to the first phase, the one that he imagines the rabbi prefers:

An unhappy people in a happy world—
Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference.
An unhappy people in an unhappy world—

Here are too many mirrors for misery.
A happy people in an unhappy world—
It cannot be. There's nothing there to roll

On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.
A happy people in a happy world—
Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.

Turn back to where we were when we began:
An unhappy people in a happy world. (CP 420)

The rabbi's preferred world—a return “to where we were when we began” or a return to the past as it is handed down through tradition—consoles the rabbi because it resides in authority. The antiapocalyptic prophet's ironically deployed imperatives (*read, turn back, solemnize*) are playful at the rabbi's expense, sounding like authoritative pronouncements that must be followed. But the antiapocalyptic prophet resides outside the temple, watching with an ironic gleam the rabbi's return to “this extremity, / This contrivance” (CP 420). The rabbi tries to avoid dialogic encounters with the antiapocalyptic prophet by relying on authority. His interaction with his congregation is ritualized, a ceremony that offers consolation for “an unhappy people in a happy world.”

The rabbi of “Auroras” must “solemnize the secretive syllables” (CP 420) and thus keep the canonized text sacred. Indeed, this text must be preserved and protected, but “the secretive syllables” ultimately work against the rabbi's desire to maintain a final text. The double sense of “secretive” suggests not only mystery and hidden sanctity, but also secretions, out-flowings (or even overflowings) of meaning. The antiapocalyptic prophet's comic dispersion of “the simplest word” creates an uncontainable quality in the rabbi's text, a scattering of language into spectral phases (or phrases). Such phases create loci of dispute outside of the holy temple, and these loci color the rabbi's activities both ironically and admiringly. The antiapocalyptic prophet does not disdain the rabbi's efforts; on the contrary, the rabbi's need to finalize a text and so preserve the tradition of “the never-failing genius” (CP 420) motivates the antiapocalyptic prophet's dialogic evasion. Unlike the rabbi, he seems willing to play Buffo, though unwilling to be completely trapped in the role of Buffo.

With the antiapocalyptic prophet looking on, the rabbi cannot contain the “secretive syllables.” They slip and slide in a delightfully spectral dispersion in the final two stanzas, belying the careful control of the voice of doom's diamond cabala:

In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
The full of fortune and the full of fate,
As if he lived all lives, that he might know,

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick.

(CP 420–21)

Ambiguous gaps in modification and syntax allow the secretive syllables to pour out of their ark. The rabbi's God and the rabbi merge into indistin-

guishable forces so that it is impossible to know whether it is the rabbi or his God that “meditates a whole.” “These” perhaps refers to the “unhappy people,” but it also suggests *these lines of this poem* where the rabbi finds himself unhappy. On the other hand, the rabbi himself seems powerful since he makes his life by evasively imagining his own maker: “This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres, / Contriving balance to contrive a whole, / The vital, the never-failing genius” (CP 420). “In these” lines, “by these lights”—the illuminating lights of the poem as well as the figurative and spectral lights of the auroras, which earlier dash the voice of doom’s apocalyptic pronouncements by their immense flashings—the rabbi veers and creates his own text, even if that text is a return “to where we were when we began.”⁶ But the antiapocalyptic prophet has evaded the rabbi’s evasions; he resides outside the congregation, watching the process of his dispersion, even admiring its creativity and its forceful authority. He watches with irony, somehow knowing the beauty of his evasive struggling against the “wind and weather” and “winter’s nick.” His own evasion of the rabbi’s authority allows his dispersion of wind and weather against “the spectre of the spheres” because the rabbi is so powerful. He is nearer the *itness* of the innocent world insofar as the voice of doom pronounces the world’s end. He has a different perspective, an ironic as well as admiring point of view, which allows a relative freedom of imagination because he cannot, after all, escape the “winter’s nick” of the voice of doom, the final two words on the page, which strain to pronounce a seemingly undeniable finality, regardless of the brief and warming “blaze of summer straw.”

The final two words on the page, however, are not really the final two words of the poem if Stevens has managed to fashion a readership on the model of his dialogically evasive, antiapocalyptic prophet. As I suggested at the beginning of my discussion, the prophet provides a model for Stevens’ readers, the very thing Stevens suggests when he writes, in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” that the poet’s function is “to make his imagination [the readers’].” He goes on to say that the poet “fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others” (NA 29). That “light in the minds of others” reaches beyond the formal ending of the poem, and its continuance derives energy from the evasive maneuvering of the antiapocalyptic prophet, Stevens’ characterization of a quite powerful reader who ultimately does “reimagine” the poem. For all of its apparent bleakness (and many of Stevens’ poems “end” in *apparent* bleakness), the “end” of “Auroras” continues to flash brilliantly because it teaches us how to read. Resisting the voice of doom, the antiapocalyptic prophet, through his imaginative agonistics, fashions a method of reading appropriate to a dangerously apocalyptic world. If “The Auroras of Autumn” is apocalyptic, it is a spectral apocalypse that unfolds “An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything” (CP 417) we are,

lighting our imaginations, teaching us to revolve in what Stevens hoped would be our dialogically evasive encounters with his poetry.

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Notes

¹See, for example, Gerald Bruns's "Stevens without Epistemology" and Marjorie Perloff's "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric."

²Robert DeMaria's "'The Thinker as Reader': The Figure of the Reader in the Writing of Wallace Stevens," Joseph Kronick's "Large White Man Reading: Stevens' Genealogy of the Giant," and Alan Perlis' "Wallace Stevens' Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor" have discussed how Stevens characterizes readers in his "reader poems."

³On Stevens' use of indefinites, Margaret Dickie writes, "these open-ended terms summarize what has never been detailed and leave the poet free to create categories, to change the space he occupies, to revise his own thinking, and not to represent a preexisting world, to match his thoughts to an origin outside themselves. Stevens' use of the nonspecific 'it' is reminiscent of Dickinson in such poems as 'It was not Death' . . . where 'it' remains mysterious and significant and capable of endlessly proliferating rather than of precisely distinguishing" (158).

⁴Vendler describes the evasive effect of canto I as if it were a sort of simultaneously pleasing and frightening roller coaster ride: "the motion of the canto is a nervous ascent and descent and reascend and redescent, a vertiginous uncertainty expressed in antiphonal rhetoric" (247).

⁵Bloom coins this phrase after quoting Vendler's point about Stevens' rhetorical questions, which serve "more as hints than as easily answerable rhetorical questions" (147).

⁶In a letter to Renato Poggioli (July 1953), Stevens remarks that "the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes" (L 786).

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Stevens, Benjamin, and Messianic Time

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ONE OF THE PERSISTENT sticking points in Wallace Stevens criticism is what to make of the final two cantos of "The Comedian as the Letter C." Most readers, even those sympathetic to the poem as a whole, find themselves uncomfortable with Stevens' unceremonious dumping of his hero, Crispin, into a mundane existence centered on hearth and home, especially after the heroic (or mock heroic) scope of Crispin's adventures in the first four cantos. The benign if absolute domination of what Stevens terms "the quotidian," as illustrated by "A Nice Shady Home" (canto V) and "And Daughters with Curls" (canto VI), seems all too cruel, a perverse punishment imposed by a capricious poet turning on his hero, even if that poet had already from the outset (hedging his bets as it were) laced the narrative of Crispin's journey with an overly insistent ironic edge.¹

The triumph of the quotidian is represented here as the final turn of a particularly cruel joke: the irrepressible return of precisely those forms of life that the journey to the new world was supposed to have overthrown:

Crispin concocted doctrine from the rout.
The world, a turnip once so readily plucked,
Sacked up and carried overseas, daubed out
Of its ancient purple, pruned to the fertile main,
And sown again by the stiffest realist,
Came reproduced in purple, family font,
The same insoluble lump. The fatalist
Stepped in and dropped the chuckling down his craw,
Without grace or grumble. (CP 45)

Now, rather than resist, Crispin the formerly questing hero takes on a new identity, Crispin "the fatalist," forced to eat his humble pie. What seems like a worse betrayal is the narrator's parting shot, "So may the relation of each man be clipped" (CP 46): chin up, the poem seems to say, the quotidian is not so bad.

Of course, the quotidian *is* so bad, the banal antithesis to Crispin's desired object in the first four cantos: the founding of an ideal colony and the concomitant ideal aesthetic. Yet the reactionary descent into the quotidian is neither a betrayal, nor a "haphazard denouement" (CP 40), but rather

the necessary ending. What, the poem has asked us to imagine, might the ideal colony and the ideal aesthetic look like, and how is life to be lived after the realization of those ideal forms? By staging Crispin's journey in redemptive terms, the poem has placed a tremendous burden on its hero: to make the leap from unredeemed historical time into life inside redemptive, Messianic time. But the fact that the forms of life post-redemption replicate the forms of the unredeemed world, the "same insoluble lump," suggests that the redemptive moment has not been realized, that, moreover, the ideology that envisages self-redemption through colonialization is doomed from the start. The deadening, always-the-same repetition that characterizes the hegemony of the "quotidian" signals the endurance of unredeemed existence, a "homogenous, empty time" quite opposed to the "Messianic time" that Crispin's new world was supposed to have inaugurated. Not only is the endlessly repeating nature of the "quotidian" a feature of ongoing, unredeemed historical time, but, as we shall see, its hypnotic emptiness recurs later in Stevens as a kind of anti-Messianic, profane existence, an almost apocalyptic nihilism that precedes entry into Messianic time.

I borrow the terms "homogenous, empty time" and "Messianic time" from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (*Illuminations* 253–64).² Historical time is, for Benjamin, "homogeneous, empty time," a haphazard, meaningless series of events that a weak historicism tries to arrange into a teleology it naively associates with "progress." Opposed to this "homogeneous, empty time" is the redemptive, Messianic time, in which distinctions among past, present, and future are all absorbed into a single entity, what Benedict Anderson describes as "a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present" (24). Only Messianic time can redeem the emptiness and homogeneity of historical time since, as Benjamin writes, "only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments" (*Illuminations* 254). Thus, the task of the historian (the "historical materialist") is not to recount "the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (263), but rather to isolate moments of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) within the "homogeneous, empty time" of history, that is, moments in which the eternity of Messianic time shines forth. "History," Benjamin writes, "is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (261). This "*Jetztzeit*" or "now-time" (which is variously translated as "presence of the now" or "time of the now") is ahistorical, outside of the empty "homogenous course of history"; it is "shot through with chips of Messianic time," a "sign of a Messianic cessation of happening" (263) ("*das Zeichen einer messianischen Stillstellung des Geschehens*" [*Illuminationen* 260]).³

Stevens, of course, had no knowledge of Benjamin's terms; nonetheless, I want to suggest that Benjamin's theories of Messianic time as well as his related theories of a prelapsarian "pure language" (*reine Sprache*)

resonate with a redemptive, Messianic strain in Stevens.⁴ Though Crispin's descent into the quotidian can be seen as the dogged persistence of homogeneous, empty time, Stevens did not abandon the redemptive goals implicit in Crispin's search for an ideal aesthetic and a new colony. Crispin's failure to get outside historical time does not scuttle the entire redemptive project, but rather signals the collapse of both colonization and certain poetic forms—verse epic, allegory—as vehicles for that redemption. Thus, the disappointing ending to “The Comedian as the Letter C” indirectly provides Stevens with a new jumping-off point for his major poem of redemptive aesthetics, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” In “Notes,” Messianic time is not posited as something that can be carved out geographically by a human agent or articulated in a verse narrative; rather, Messianic time exists *beyond* the scope of the poem. The poem does not describe that experience or time, but rather posits incomplete “notes” that gesture obliquely “toward” the “supreme fiction.” The climactic moment of Messianic time is projected into an as-yet-unrealized future, a moment that is anything but quotidian:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

(CP 406–07)

Whereas in our homogeneous, empty time, discrete categories like the irrational and the rational are locked in an unresolvable antinomy, in Messianic time they are resolved into a unity—“the irrational *is* rational.” Moreover, as in Benjamin, the entry into Messianic time is marked by a change in the relationship of language to the world, a shift from language as cognitive to language as creative. In the essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Benjamin, following the Kabbalists, identifies divine language in Genesis as the original performative utterance, a speech act that has the power of issuing forth creation:

In individual acts of creation (1:3; 1:11) only the words “Let there be” occur. In this “Let there be” and in the words “He named” at the beginning and end of the act, the deep and clear relation of the creative act to language appears each time. With the creative omnipotence of language it [creation] begins, and at the end language as it were assimilates the created, names it. Language is therefore both creative and the finished creation, it is word and name. In God name is creative because it is word,

and God's word is cognizant because it is name. (*Reflections* 322–23)⁵

Beneath this divinely creative language is Adamic language, the power of naming the world that God grants to Adam in Eden. Adamic language is a less perfect version of the divine, creative language, but nonetheless completes the creation by, in Richard Wolin's description, "translating the imperfect, mute language of things into the language of names" (42).⁶ "Man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator," Benjamin writes (*Reflections* 323). The power of naming is thus a sacred one, linked to the original divine power of creative language. In Adamic language, the name has an essential link to its object and not the arbitrary relation that Benjamin ascribes to the "bourgeois view of language" (*Reflections* 324).⁷ As a translation of the mute object, the name redeems that object from silence and draws it back closer to the divine word that created it. The "name-language of man and the nameless one of things," Benjamin writes, are "related in God and released from the same creative word" (*Reflections* 326). Finally, there is human language, the language that emerges after the Fall and the banishment from Eden. The proliferation of human languages (as recorded in the Tower of Babel episode) is further removed from the pure language of Adam and the creative word of God. The pure language remains as a Platonic ideal, an abstraction to which the translator, according to Benjamin, must always aspire:⁸

the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact, and which has stepped out of name language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic. The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). That is really the Fall of language-mind. The word as something externally communicating, as it were a parody by the expressly mediate word of the expressly immediate, the creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful, Adamite language-mind that stand between them. (*Reflections* 327)

Whereas divine word embodies the creative force and Adamic word marks an essential link between the name and its object, human language articulates a fundamental separation—between word and object, between the knowing subject and known object—indicative of the post-Edenic separation between God and humankind. Messianic time, therefore, signals the redemption of human language, the closing of the gap between word and object (or signifier and signified), and the ultimate return to the creative power of the divine word.

Thus, to return to Stevens, when the speaker triumphantly declares at the end of "Notes"—"I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo. / You will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (*CP* 407)—he is re-

claiming for poetics (for the “supreme fiction”) the primal force of the Adamic language of names. The “calling by name,” rather than weakly following after the object, now has an arresting power over that object; the name wrenches the “fluent mundo” out of its endless (and homogeneous) revolutions and instead issues forth a new Messianic era in which those revolutions are absorbed into the eternity of the “crystal,” and where the essential unity between word and world is restored.

Stevens’ conception of the “supreme fiction” thus inaugurates a use of language analogous to Benjamin’s “pure language”; it is a quasi-Messianic redemption of debased human language to which all poems aspire.⁹ But though the ultimate redemption of language must necessarily lie outside the scope of Stevens’ poem (since that poem is written in unredeemed, human language), nevertheless, there are moments in any poem, in any artistic expression, in which that redemptive state is implicit, moments which are, in Benjamin’s phrase, “shot through with chips of Messianic time” (*Illuminations* 263).¹⁰ Such a moment is described in canto VIII of the third section of “Notes,” “It Must Give Pleasure.” The canto begins, as perhaps befits a Messianic vision, with an image of an angel:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violet¹¹ abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

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

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

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

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

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

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

(CP 404–05)

The speaker links the blissful moment in which all human needs are satisfied with the drawing together in redemptive time of the elements that, in historical time, have been separated. Thus, in redemptive time, the self is no longer separated from its imaginative projections; instead, self and other are united together in a single "experience": "Is it he or is it I that experience this?" Moreover, language no longer communicates something other than itself, but rather becomes the site in which the subject articulates his own self-identity: "I have not but I am and as I am, I am." Here Stevens is making his own biblical allusion, not to the role of language in Genesis, but to God's revelation of his name to Moses at the burning bush. The bush that burns but is not consumed—an otherworldly image analogous to Stevens' "fluent mundo" that "will have stopped revolving except in crystal"—provides the context for God's articulation in Exodus 3:14, "I am that I am."¹² For Stevens, the moment when the subject might come into that divine articulation of self-presence is charged with a millennial anticipation; the speaker "keep[s] saying there is an hour" and, later, "if there is an hour there is a day, / There is a month, a year, there is a time. . . ." The tremendous anticipation *in* time is directed toward the Messianic break *with* time; the everlasting *present* of Messianic time is characterized by the everlasting *presence* of divine language: "I have not but I am and as I am, I am."

Having reached these visionary heights, Stevens now takes a somewhat surprising swerve. The final stanza of this canto turns to the mythic figure of Cinderella as a kind of sobering corrective to the willed redemption the canto has just enacted:

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

In the fairy tale, Cinderella inserts herself into her fantasy, living "happily ever after" inside the imaginative projections of her desired fulfillment. But there is something disconcerting about linking the Messianic moment to the Cinderella fairy tale. If Messianic time is characterized by the resolution of the various divisions of historical time (subject-object, past-present-future, word-world) into a single experience of unity, Stevens' Cinderella story is merely a debased, profane version of that experience. What seems like redemption to Cinderella is instead merely "reflections, the escapades of death. . . ." Rather than having undergone a truly redemptive experience, Cinderella has become mesmerized by her own fantasies, "fulfilling herself beneath the roof." In the unwritten postscript to this fairy tale, one might expect to find her, like Crispin, resigning herself to the inevitable onslaught of the "quotidian" that typifies life inside historical time.

The allusion to Cinderella shows that Stevens' celebration of the imagination (itself long celebrated by Stevens critics) is not unequivocal; the "chips of Messianic time" that inhere in an aesthetic artifact are easily confused with a false Messianism ascribed to the imagination as auto-redemptive agent; instead of lifting the subject outside of historical time, myth serves as a profane imitation of redemption that locks the subject in the loops of a delusional, endlessly repeated (homogeneous) imagination. This same situation is accorded a more elaborate version in "The World as Meditation," with Penelope serving as the mythic version of Cinderella. Like Cinderella, Penelope awaits the arrival of a redemptive figure who remains outside the scope of the poem. The poem narrates Penelope's waiting, her anticipation of Ulysses' arrival and with it, her presumed entry into a redemptive time. An "inhuman meditation, larger than her own" (CP 521) continues to order the natural world, mending the trees and washing the winter away, and within that larger order is Penelope's lesser meditation, one that weakly imitates that larger, divine meditation. Like Cinderella, the imagining subject inserts herself into a powerful fantasy of redemption, in which the boundaries between fantasy and reality are purposely blurred.

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

It was Ulysses and it was not. (CP 521)

Messianic time marks the reunification of word and object, fantasy and reality, when the naming power of Adamic language calls forth the essence of the thing named. For Penelope, caught in mythic time, the redemptive imagination seduces and deceives: "But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun?" Penelope's imagination becomes a profane imitation of the power of Adamic language. Her all-too-human language is caught instead in an endless oscillation between a willed identity with the object being named and non-identity with that object: "It was Ulysses and it was not." The final stanza leaves us with a disquieting image of Penelope. Seen from outside of the loops of her imagination, she appears delusional, even a little mad:

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.
(CP 521)

Unlike the arresting magic of the "calling by name" at the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" that signals the entry into Messianic time, Penelope's blank repetition of Ulysses' name becomes a self-hypnotic ritual,

the antithesis to the experience of language in Messianic time. She is locked inside the mythic sphere of the “always-the-same,” wholly dominated by her imaginary projections. Rather than redemptive, the “world as meditation” describes existence inside the “homogeneous time of the historical era,” which, Wolin tells us, Benjamin “equates with the notion of eternal repetition or *myth*” (51).¹³ The endless rituals Penelope enacts in the final stanza—combing her hair, repeating the “patient syllables”—are distorted echoes of the famous weaving and unweaving scheme Homer’s Penelope devised to delay the suitors. In Stevens’ version, however, the suitors are pointedly absent, and Penelope’s repetitive rituals are a testament to her subjugation to the mythic fate of homogeneous, empty time. The “world as meditation” is not Penelope’s redemption; indeed, it is precisely that world that Messianic time will abruptly end.¹⁴

“Only the Messiah himself consummates all history,” Benjamin writes at the beginning of his “Theologico-Political Fragment,” “in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic” (*Reflections* 312). Human history, in other words, cannot hasten or progress to the Messianic age. Redemptive time is not the culmination of historical time but rather a sharp break with that time, “a qualitative leap into a realm *beyond* history” (Wolin 58). Still, Penelope’s and Cinderella’s imaginative projections reveal the centrally redemptive nature of human imagination, that the “image of happiness,” as Benjamin writes, “is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption” (*Illuminations* 254). But the desire for self-redemption through human imagination (and through self-projection into fantasies of personal fulfillment) reinscribes human history not into redemptive space but back into the profane existence of the “always-the-same.” It is precisely the profanity of that endeavor that, paradoxically, does hasten Messianic time. The deeper Cinderella’s and Penelope’s descent into the self-subjugation of fantasy, the sooner, according to the dialectical, mystical logic of Benjamin’s redemptive poetics, will Messianic time arrive to break those chains of subjugation. “If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts,” Benjamin writes, “and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach” (*Reflections* 312). Crispin’s, Penelope’s, and Cinderella’s delusional, self-imprisoning search for happiness, may be, after all, an apocalyptic indicator of the imminent Messianic age.

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¹Harold Bloom writes that in these final two cantos “the sourness of human and poetic failure is so evident that any critic must hesitate before ascribing intentionality to some manifest poetic blots” (82). Helen Vendler reads in these cantos evidence of Stevens’ “revulsion from the proliferation of life. . . . He felt obliged to pretend an instinct for the fertility of earth, when his true instinct was for its austerities and its dilapidations” (43, 45).

²In Benjamin’s original German, “homogeneous, empty time” appears as “*homogene und leere Zeit*” (*Illuminationen* 260), but the term “Messianic time” appears in German without the word “Zeit.” The historian, Benjamin writes, “establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (“*Er begründet so einen Begriff der Gegenwart als der ‘Jetztzeit,’ in welcher Splitter der messianischen eingesprenkt sind*” [*Illuminationen* 261]). The English rendering of “*der messianischen*” as “of Messianic time” is somewhat misleading, since the onset of the Messianic age marks the end of chronological, historical time as we know it; Messianic time is precisely the absence of time. Benjamin’s theories regarding the Messianic age and its relation to historical time emerge out of his interest in the Jewish Messianic and mystical traditions, which he came to through his close and early friendship with Gershom Scholem, who was later to become the major historian of Kabbalah in the twentieth century. Scholem writes, “Two categories above all, and especially in their Jewish versions, assume a central place in his [Benjamin’s] writings: on the one hand Revelation, the idea of the Torah and of sacred texts in general, and on the other hand the Messianic idea and Redemption. Their significance as regulative ideas governing his thought cannot be overrated” (193).

³Richard Wolin, in his study *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, writes that for Benjamin, “the philosophy of history becomes *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of salvation, and the task of the critic—or later, that of the historical materialist—is that of rescuing the few unique visions of transcendence that grace the continuum of history, the now-times (*Jetztzeiten*), from the fate of oblivion which incessantly threatens to consume them. Only in this manner can one prevent the fragile traces of salvation from being swallowed whole by the destructive power of unredeemed historical life, which Benjamin designates as the mythic, homogenous, empty time of the ‘always-the-same’ (*Das Immergleiche*). To preserve a record of such now-times, the function of historical remembrance, is the ultimate end of the method of redemptive criticism” (48).

⁴In *Modernism and the Other in Stevens, Frost, and Moore*, Andrew M. Lakritz reads Stevens through a Benjaminian lens, though he does not focus on Benjamin’s theories of redemptive time and language. Instead, Lakritz links Stevens to Benjamin’s writings on the “destructive character.” See Chapter 2, “Wallace Stevens as Destructive Character.”

⁵Wolin writes “according to Kabbalistic doctrine, it is through language that God created the world. Hence, all existence has its ultimate origin and significance in the creative language of God. While human language retains close ties with divine language, it is merely *receptive* and *cognitive*; i.e., it is confined to the world of knowledge. Divine language, however, is *creative*; i.e., it has engendered the world and everything in it” (40).

⁶“God did not create man from the word,” Benjamin writes, “and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served *Him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man” (*Reflections* 323).

⁷"The status of this Adamic language," Giorgio Agamben writes, "is, therefore, that of a word which communicates nothing beyond itself, and in which, therefore, spiritual essence and linguistic essence coincide. Such a language, in fact, has no content, it does not communicate objects through signifieds, but rather it is perfectly transparent with regard to itself" (173).

⁸See "The Task of the Translator" (*Illuminations* 69–82).

⁹One of Stevens' aphorisms in "Adagia" reasserts the desired essential "identity" between word and object: "The word must be the thing it represents otherwise it is a symbol. It is a question of identity" (*OP* 194).

¹⁰It is the task of the critic, according to Benjamin, to isolate those moments of Messianic time within the artwork, to release their truth-content from the body of the text. Wolin writes that for Benjamin "there seem to be definite parallels between his conception of literary works of art as hieroglyphs of redeemed life and the Kabbalistic idea of a state of redemption whose nature can be intuited through a linguistic analysis of sacred texts" (39).

¹¹Although the text has "violent," it is a typographical error for "violet."—Editor.

¹²God's revelation of his name to Moses—"Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh"—has long frustrated biblical translators. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* translates the phrase as "I am who I am" but in a note also provides the variants, "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be" (73). In his more recent translation, Everett Fox retains the Hebrew in transliteration and adds the formulation, "I will be-there howsoever I will be-there," adding in a note that the "syntax is difficult" and that others simply use "I am that I am." See Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* 268–70. Eleanor Cook, as part of her reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as a "poem that rewrites 'supreme' writing, that is, our sacred scriptures" (215), shows how various formulations of "I am" unfold in the poem.

¹³"Man stands under the domination of mythical fate when his powers of remembrance fail him: that is, he is condemned to repeat. The recurrence of myth in unredeemed historical life remains an object of attack throughout Benjamin's writings" (Wolin 51).

¹⁴The more typical reading of this poem sees Penelope's imagination as heroic and empowering. Louis Martz writes "her imagination of Ulysses, her constant meditation of reunion with the man she constantly creates in her mind . . . composes within herself a world of value and order" (134). More recently, Mary Sidney Watson has argued that Penelope's meditation is a protective response against a hostile environment: "For the creative person then, the imaginative function creates a new internal order by reordering the perception of a complex outer reality. . . . The imagination enables the self to construct a sphere of safety, to take over the maternal role and provide its own protection against the 'pressure of reality' " (80–81).

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Stevens, Hegel, and the Palm at the End of the Mind

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INTRODUCTION

WALLACE STEVENS' POEM "Of Mere Being" is apocalyptic in the sense that it uncovers (*apokalyptein*) a final relationship to being, and is in this sense a poem of supreme fiction. I begin by focusing on the palm that rises "Beyond the last thought" (*OP* 141) in the first stanza and on the "of" in the poem's title. Hegel's discussion of symbolism in his *Aesthetics* is then used to explore how the poem is one of supreme fiction. I conclude by arguing that, when we lose our connection to mere being, we become involved in what Stevens calls a "later reason" (*CP* 401).

I. THE PALM BEYOND THE LAST THOUGHT

Stevens opens the poem with what might be called a philosophical problem, the solution to which is never explicitly given: "The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought, rises. . . ." Is "Beyond the last thought" an epistemological or an eschatological phrase? If epistemological, does the expression mean that we are beyond any kind of thought—that is, beyond traditional faculties of thought (intuition, imagination, understanding, memory, reason, etc.)? Is this an evocation of something transcending the mind's ability to grasp, an evocation of the sublime? Or is it a return to pure intuition before thought processes it? In other words, are we beyond thought in that we return to intuition, or even to an imagined intuition, these latter being taken as somehow antecedent to thought? Stevens leaves only the traces of an epistemological query. Perhaps "last thought" is not an epistemological, but an eschatological idea, referring to the last thought one would ever have. Perhaps the last thought is that of death. Unable to decide between an epistemological and eschatological reading, one might ask whether pure intuition, death, and the sublime are all somehow being invoked, and whether they are even different for Stevens. I want to suggest that the force of the "beyond" is a return to—a necessary, developing, folding back on to—the relationship between mean-

ing and word. This requires abandoning preconceptions in order to look at conception, at the “beginning, in dual” of symbolic interpretation.

II. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN “OF”

The word “genitive” involves just this beginning. It is etymologically related, through its Latin origin (*genitivus*), to the Greek word *genesis* (γενεσις). “Genesis” means “origin, source . . . beginning, in dual” (Liddell and Scott 343). In Stevens, the genitive is alive. In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens writes: “it was not a choice / Between excluding things. It was not choice / Between, but of” (*CP* 403). The genitive relation arises, becomes. The poem “Of Mere Being” does not flatly mirror Being, abstracting particulars onto a Cartesian plane, giving rise to a choice between values.¹ Rather, the poem makes us choose “of.” In a way I hope to make clear later, this involves us in its generation of meaning: we are “of” the poem. The genitive has to do with our relation to being.

“Of Mere Being” brings to light what Hegel viewed as a necessary interplay of experiencing subject and the object experienced. It is an interplay that is constitutive of both subject and object, and one without which neither could exist.² Neither subject nor object admits of complete autonomy. Thus despite appearances to the contrary, there is no “view from nowhere”³ and no ineffable beyond.⁴ That is to say, neither Stevens nor Hegel stops at the (Kantian) view that the presence of the self is in part constitutive of an object of knowledge. For them there is no purely subjective perspective. Similarly, there is no object “in-itself” separate from our developing relationship to it. Hegel writes:

It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless *we* go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something beyond there which can be seen. (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 103)

This metaphor of a curtain concealing an inner world, and what Hegel says here about it, is appropriate when we first look at “Of Mere Being.” The poem at first seems like a veil behind which is concealed mere Being. But as I hope to show, the poem is about how we are of it, and it is of us.

III. THE BIRD’S FOREIGN SONG

Uncovering this idea of a beyond for what it really is helps us to understand not only the palm but also the bird in the palm and the bird’s song in stanza two. Before turning to a solution, let us look briefly at the challenge posed by the image of the bird. “A gold-feathered bird / Sings in the palm, without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song” (*OP* 141). Stevens seems most Kantian at this point: the bird’s song seems to evoke something beyond phenomena, an unattainable in-itself. Yet what

is not accessible arises within the imagery that the poem has produced in us of a bird singing in a palm tree. We might therefore ask, in what way is this negation, this limitation of meaning, present within, indeed a part of the imagined scene? I do not believe that we are simply to imagine the limitation as a piece of information about it, a finite value attached to the object, that we merely represent the absence flatly, as an attribute of the bird's song. Rather, the estrangement is integral to the very process of imagining. It is at the heart of symbolism and is, as we will see later, best understood in terms of the genitive.

Although it appears as though Stevens' poem "Of Mere Being," which invites us to move "beyond thought" and which has us imagine a song "without human feeling or meaning," is pointing to the ineffable, this is not the case. I want to show that what Stevens writes of mere being brings to light that very sundering of the imagination that is at the heart of what Hegel calls Spirit. Stevens is therefore not appealing to something beyond words, but rather to that in words that orients us properly to being. To begin making sense of the poem and this claim about the genitive, let us turn to Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

IV. THE SYMBOLISM OF "OF MERE BEING"

In his introduction to the "Symbolic Form of Art" Hegel writes that "the whole of symbolic art may be understood as a continuing struggle for compatibility of meaning and shape" (*Aesthetics* 317).⁵ Hegel divides his discussion into three parts, beginning with "Unconscious Symbolism," then dealing with "Symbolism of the Sublime," and finally discussing "Conscious Symbolism of the Comparative Art-Form" (*Aesthetics* 378–427). Of this last form Hegel writes: "By conscious symbolism, I mean, we are to understand that the meaning is not only explicitly known but is *expressly* posited as different from the external way in which it is represented" (*Aesthetics* 378). Although some readers might assert that "Of Mere Being" falls under "symbolism of the sublime," I hold that as a poem of supreme fiction it does not. Rather than pointing to something beyond (which is the hallmark of the symbolism of the sublime), "Of Mere Being" is explicit about its meaning. As we have seen, for Hegel the ineffable is not what is interesting. I would say the same when reading Stevens' poem. What is so compelling about Stevens' bird and palm is that they do *not* succeed in reaching beyond thought. They are themselves—to borrow a phrase from Stevens—the "late plural" (*CP* 382) of their own pointing: they are that which is being pointed at by the poem, and yet it is this very determination that ends up being in question. In other words, although it is not entirely false to say that the symbols used here point to something sublime or absolute, this mode of explanation can be misleading in an important way because it appears to suggest that what we are looking for is beyond the words of the poem, whereas we are concerned with what is

intrinsic to the words. Our concern lies, therefore, in the last of the three art-forms discussed by Hegel. That is, it falls under Hegel's analysis of Conscious Symbolism of the Comparative Art-Form.

In his introduction to the symbolism of the comparative art-form, Hegel writes that the fable, parable, proverb, apologue and metamorphoses, riddle, allegory, metaphor, image, and simile all "belong to the . . . symbolic form of art because they are generally imperfect and therefore a mere search for true art; this search does not contain the ingredients for a genuine mode of configuration, yet it views them only in their finitude, separation, and mere relation, and so it remains subordinate" (*Aesthetics* 382).⁶ This imperfection, which is the hallmark of both symbolic art and symbolic communication, is what drives us beyond our satisfaction with perfection of either art or communication. (This is not to support the view, erroneously attributed to Hegel, that art is dead.⁷) Any attempt to enforce perfection gives rise to fervent rebellion. One might say it gives rise to the "giant that fought / Against the murderous alphabet" (*CP* 179). Similarly, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* it is the imperfections of the various viewpoints consciousness adopts—imperfections in consciousness' "picture thinking" (*Vorstellen*) or representation of how things are—that drives consciousness to absolute knowing. (It is also, I believe, what keeps Hegel's absolute knowing from being totalitarian.) One might say then that for Hegel, we cannot be satisfied with perfection in art or of art. A certain imperfection is essential to our absolute relationship to art, just as genitive engendering is essential to words and separateness is essential to our relationship to another being. (As Goethe once said, "Es gibt keine Lehre ohne Sonderung" [514] ["There is no imparting without a parting"].) But one should not confuse imperfection with the ineffable. The imperfection lies in the nature of the genitive and can be fully celebrated there. We can see this in Stevens' "The Poems of Our Climate." The poem shows how the symbol, to the very degree that it succeeds, is incomplete and yet that this incompleteness is, in the end, to be celebrated. "[T]he imperfect is our paradise" (*CP* 194).

The question now is, how are we to interpret the images in "Of Mere Being" in terms of imperfection and in terms of supreme fiction? In Hegelian terms, in what way is Stevens consciously using symbols to express mere being? Hegel divides Conscious Symbolism into three parts: the first encompasses the fable, parable, apologue, proverb, and metamorphoses. The second encompasses riddle, allegory, metaphor, image, and simile. The third is made up of didactic and descriptive poetry. It is clear, I think, that "Of Mere Being" does not fall under any of the first or third forms.⁸ But we can legitimately ask whether, through the palm and the singing bird, Stevens is presenting us with a riddle "Of Mere Being." Hegel writes,

the symbol, strictly so-called, is *inherently* enigmatical [rätselhaft] because the external existent by means of which a universal meaning is to be brought to our contemplation still remains different from the meaning that it has to represent, and it is therefore open to doubt in what sense the shape has to be taken. But the riddle belongs to conscious symbolism and it is distinguished at once from the symbol, strictly so-called, by reason of the fact that the meaning is clearly and completely known to the inventor of the riddle; and the shape that veils it, through which the meaning is to be guessed, is therefore chosen deliberately for this semi-veiling. Symbols in the strict sense are, both before and after, unsolved problems, while the riddle is absolutely solved. (*Aesthetics* 397)⁹

Eleanor Cook attempts to solve the riddle “Of Mere Being” through cross-referencing. She writes,

The implicit pun is on the word “phoenix,” which is what this fiery bird is. The Greek word for this fabulous sacred bird is also used for a date-palm. . . . [Stevens] echoes the bird of the earthly paradise from the lemon-tree land of *An Ordinary Evening* in “dangle down,” also rhymed on. He evokes the sun once more, for the phoenix lives in the City of the Sun (Ovid, *Met.* XV.391–407). He uses no language of upwardness and no language of home. The poem is of mortality yet with a sense of immortality, though not personal immortality. It is a kind of will and testament of song. Thus, I think, the touching on Yeats; this is a Byzantium poem of sorts, a land of gold and kinds of transmutation. (Cook 312–13)

These cross-references provide breadth. They ring out as a “late plural.” But do they miss the point? One might conclude that the references to things familiar perpetuate the foreignness of the bird’s song because we are left wondering about its point, about the “ever-early candor” (*CP* 382) that gives rise to such proliferation of referents.

But is there an idea that undoes the riddle “Of Mere Being”? Hegel writes of the “unity” that solves a riddle: “This unity, the subject of those scattered predicates, is precisely the simple idea, the word that solves the riddle, and the problem of the riddle is to discover or guess it out of this apparently confused disguise” (*Aesthetics* 398). As we have seen, despite a breadth of possible referents, the poem on this level persists in being enigmatic and elusive. Hegel comments “The riddle . . . is the conscious wit of symbolism which puts to the test the wit of ingenuity and the flexibility in combining things” (*Aesthetics* 398). But Stevens is not simply obfuscating. In Stevens’ younger years he might have engaged in such playful combi-

nations and endless elusiveness. But by the time of this later poem, he no longer does.

According to Hegel, a riddle's "mode of representation is self-destructive because it leads to the guessing of the riddle" (*Aesthetics* 398). Once Oedipus guesses the riddling words of the Sphinx, the Sphinx is destroyed. It is important to note that it is the source of the riddle that is destroyed. The question and its answer are preserved. (In the interest of proliferating cross-references, Oedipus' answer is "the life of mere human being.") Any answer to Stevens' poem would certainly have to do with mere being, but his poem does not pose a question. Thus no "answer" is justified. The bird's song remains foreign.

Without a question, there is no riddle to solve. We must therefore leave the form of the riddle behind. To get to the point of the poem, to its basic concept, to its fundamental conception as it were, we must turn to metaphor.¹⁰ Here we begin to be successful in understanding the images in the poem.¹¹ The success is due in part, I will now argue, to the fact that metaphor most clearly expresses the nature of the genitive. But we will not be successful without an important augmentation of Hegel's account of metaphor (an augmentation that gets us in one leap from metaphor to absolute knowing!).

For Hegel the metaphor is "an entirely compressed and abbreviated comparison, in that it does not oppose image and meaning to one another but presents the image alone; the literal sense of the image, however, it extinguishes" (*Aesthetics* 403–04). The meaning of the metaphor is not explicitly expressed. "When, e.g., we hear 'sea of tears' we are compelled to take this expression not literally but only as an image" (*Aesthetics* 403). The metaphor is nevertheless clear because of what the image implies: context and any number of other relevant referents make "sea" in this phrase into a good metaphor for enormous grief.

But we must take Hegel's account of metaphor and fold it back on itself in order to understand Stevens' poem. Were "Of Mere Being" simply a case of metaphor in the way in which Hegel writes of metaphor, it would not express supreme fiction. It would be inadequate in the way that symbols—even metaphorical symbols—are inadequate according to Hegel. They do not give to thoughts their "highest and truest existence" because, despite their success (their level of "perfection") they do not express the full dialectic between point and breadth, between genesis of connection and a plurality of meanings implied in the symbol (and exhibited in interpretations). Stevens' poem does not simply use metaphor. Unlike the expression "a sea of tears," Stevens' poem neither extinguishes the literal sense of "palm" and "bird," nor completes the metaphorical meaning of each through the context as regular metaphors do. The poem is rather a celebration of metaphor. That is, on the one hand the poem gives rise to more metaphors, as we saw in Cook's reading of it. On the other hand the poem gives rise to the form of metaphor. It does so in the following way.

On the one hand the palm and bird as images invite us to think beyond them through the fact that the palm is "at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought" and that the bird's song is "foreign." But the poem never gives us that meaning that is beyond. On the other hand, this failure to provide meaning *is* implied in the poem, in that the palm is "Beyond the last thought" and in that the bird sings in the palm "without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song." Insofar as this failure is implied, the meaning of the palm and bird *are* given in the context. They are metaphors of the disjunction between meaning and form that is part and parcel of the (poem's) conception of being. The palm and bird are metaphors of the disjunction inherent not only in symbolism, but in any genitive relation.

"Of Mere Being" is a supreme metaphor. Allowing for a plurality of meanings, "Of Mere Being" also points to the nature of mere being. It points out that mere being is that of which we are. The poem reflects the genitive, the form of conception (of beginning from duality). It is a poem about engendering meaning. As such it is also apocalyptic: it presents a final image of being, one which, in seeming to point beyond itself, takes us into being. I believe it is, therefore, a poem of supreme fiction. We can see this by comparing what we know of the poem to what Stevens wrote about supreme fiction. On the one hand, because of its implications, its late plural, the poem is "A larger poem for a larger audience. . . . A mythological form, a festival sphere" (*CP* 465–66); because the implications do not stop where Cook does, but can be added to, "the subject [of supreme fiction] . . . could occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations" (*L* 435). On the other hand, as I have shown, the poem reflects the form of conception by pointing to the genitive, to the relation "of." Therefore, since the poem reveals both how meanings multiply and the form of meaningful relation, it is like "trying to create something as valid as the idea of God . . . ; the first necessity seems to be breadth . . . , [yet] the thing would never amount to much until there is no breadth or, rather, until it has all come to a point" (*L* 435).

V. "OF MERE BEING"—A SUPREME METAPHOR

Like others, Hegel observes that "every language already contains a mass of metaphors" (*Aesthetics* 404). He includes in his examples "*Fassen*" and "*Begreifen*." *Begreifen*—to grasp—is the verb for "*Begriff*," the word he uses to express the shape of the dialectic. It is translated as "Concept." He writes, "in respect of their literal meaning [such words have] a purely sensuous content, which then is lost and exchanged for a spiritual meaning, the original sense being sensuous, the second spiritual" (*Aesthetics* 404). In common language the metaphorical often takes precedence over the sensuous meaning. Hegel notes for example that if "we are to take *begreifen* in a spiritual sense, then it does not occur to us at all to think of a perceptible

grasping by the hand" (*Aesthetics* 404). The spiritual meaning appears to have let go of the literal, perceptual image. I would qualify Hegel here and assert that the literal image is not completely absent. Indeed the literal is part of what makes the spiritual meaning come alive for us.

On the surface, "Of Mere Being" leaves us grasping at "mere" images, at the mere facts of the palm and bird. The metaphorical meanings seem to exceed our grasp. But in so leaving us, Stevens wakes us to metaphor. Cook writes that the effect of Stevens' early word-play "is not so much to leave us merely displaced as to concentrate our attention on just how and why we feel at home in the first place. It awakens us." She goes on to explain that in "the later poetry [of which "Of Mere Being" is an instance], Stevens' word-play functions quite differently. It allows us to possess both a foreign and a native sense of words and place at one and the same time" (Cook 8). I would say that both these judgments fit this poem: the poem wakes us because the "native sense of" palm and bird is suspended over against our ear for a deeper meaning. We are wakened to our desire to find the new in the given.

Hegel asserts that in "living language the difference between actual metaphors and words already reduced by usage to literal expressions is easily established; whereas in dead languages this is difficult because mere etymology cannot decide the matter in the last resort" (*Aesthetics* 404). We might go further and add that in language generally the tension between the "grasping and the grasped" has a propensity to disappear. No word or phrase can escape becoming common: even Hegel's Absolute Concept is often understood as merely "some spiritual idea"; the *Begriff* is "grasped" prosaically, without a sense of its depth and meaning. This is why conscious use of metaphor, and bringing to life the metaphorical character of language, is so important. The key is to question what we have grasped. Without that questioning, communication becomes forgetful of being. We become forgetful of how we are of being and of how our words arise out of that genitive relation. In Hegel's terms, we lose sight of Spirit. Stevens' poem quickens the spirit by keeping the literal and the metaphorical apart. What keeps them apart is the alienating genitive "of." This is the idea at the heart of "Of Mere Being."

We can see the weight of this relation in the final lines of the poem. "The palm stands on the edge of space. / The wind moves slowly in the branches. / The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down" (*OP* 141). We begin with a sense of openness, of motion. The sound of the "s" in the second line loosens. In "space" the consonants are soft, requiring breath to be heard. Like the air through the singing bird's beak, the wind moves slowly in the branches. Rather than being "in the bronze decor" the wind moves in the branches; awareness moves in and through. But we are not to be lost in such airy meaning, wisped away by openness of mind. We are drawn in; incommensurability is expressed symbolically in the last line of the poem: "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down." Instead of up-

ward swords of flame, the colors in the fire-fangled feathers are drawn downward, as though even the flames of fire—whose nature, according to Aristotle, is to go up—could not escape the pull. In knowing that the fiery-colored feathers descend, we do not forget that fire rises. There is an interplay, an interdetermination, of how we see things to be in the world “really” and of how we use what is familiar to us to describe how things are in the world. This interplay is essential not just to poetry but to language generally and, I would claim, to our communication with (any) being at any level. In communication, subject and object are thoroughly infused with each other, in and through the proliferation-causing play of the surd (represented in the poem by the bird’s foreign song). The surd is the separateness of subject from its object. This separateness develops as and appears in the differences of interpretation among people about a given object’s meaning. Unreflected, the separateness can lead to an alienation of self from the way (we assert) things “really” are. By bringing awareness of separateness to bear on one’s words, we impart more than just a referent. We speak of being. It is absurd to say that fire dangles down, but without such poetic implications the image has less weight, is less meaningful. Such conscious “deceits” of perception, and the separateness to which they give rise, are essential to meaningful perception. Our communion with and communications about being are abstract without them.

The weight of mere being draws the poem to an end. Like the empty bar at the end of a symphony in which the musicians hold the count but no one plays, the end holds presence silently. The poem is a song of presence. It is about how being weighs with us; it is about the ways of being.

Meta-pherō: to carry (*phero*) with, after (*meta*). Metaphor is how being “carries over” into language and how language carries us back over to being. What we are being carried over is the gap between being and language. But the truth of metaphor, the supreme metaphor, the form of metaphor, is that it carries us. Truth—*alethia*—means “not forgetting,” not becoming submerged in the river Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Staying awake to metaphor means staying awake to the communication of mere being, not falling asleep upon the waves of the familiar.

VI. OF LATER REASONINGS

According to Hegel, the recollection of an object requires an external prompt, some outer intuition that prompts in us a similar or related image. That image arises from the mind’s depth, from the storehouse of past intuitions.¹² Imagination, however, can raise an image in the mind without a prompt. For Hegel the first externalization of the imagination is the symbol. The symbol is our initial attempt to express an imaginatively engendered connection, that “this means that.” Through the symbol we show that “this is collected with that” or “this is of that.”

Recollection and imagination can be discussed in terms of simile and metaphor. A simile is explicit about the connection: “this is like that.” A

metaphor is explicit about the connection insofar as we understand what the metaphor means. But in a metaphor the connection itself is not articulated. Stevens' poem is, however, a metaphor of metaphors: in the poem, the engendering of the metaphorical relation of one thing to another is made self-conscious. The connecting is not thereby expressed as a function (as "like"). Nor is the metaphorical connection lifted to reveal an ineffable depth of origin. Rather, we are drawn into the image (e.g., of the singing bird), into the possibility of connection; we are drawn into the possibility of connection as an engendering relation. This engendering is the bird's foreign song, the generative "of" of the symbolic imagination. Although Cook is right that the bird implies the phoenix, in her reading the nature of the genitive, the point of the poem, remains hidden. Cook understands that in "Of Mere Being" Stevens is not using a simile; she is not claiming that Stevens is saying that the bird is *like* the phoenix. But she has not formulated what kind of connection is at work. She comes close when she cites Stevens in order to explain the relationship: "These are no longer the 'intricate evasions of as'; [rather] here 'as and is are one'" (316). I believe that she wants to express the relation, to say in what way the bird *is* also the phoenix, or *is* also the bird of the earthly paradise. But she says only that Stevens is "implicitly punning on" the former, or that he "echoes" the latter. Although she rejects simile, she does not get beyond recollection: the poem has prompted her to recollect these other images of birds and their meanings. As such we do not get to the idea of "Of Mere Being," we just get more Being.

The only way to reach the point where "as and is are one" (CP 476) is, in some sense, not to reach it at all: the bird sings "without human meaning, a foreign song." The negation must be complete; we must reach the end in order to uncover what is. Cook is closest to the truth when she writes that Stevens is using anagogical metaphor, that "[a]nagogic metaphor is paradisaical." She adds, "this is as close to paradisaical language as Stevens will allow himself" (312). But this reading allows for a mystical interpretation, for the possibility that the experience of being is ineffable. I contend rather that the key to the poem lies in the genitive. The palm, the bird, the poem are engendered in an ordinary conception, one aspect of which is always a part of, yet foreign to, what we end up having grasped. Once risen, the palm, bird, or poem as a whole are in a sense absurd. This is not to say everything arises *ex nihilo*. It is to say that the supreme fiction is not this paradise or that: "The *imperfect* is our paradise." There is a great deal at stake in understanding this properly. If we do not understand this, we end up being caught in the proliferation of referents without being implied in the conception. We end up in what Stevens calls "a later reason:"

But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
We reason about them with a later reason. (*CP* 398–99)

Also from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”:

We reason of these things with later reason
And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves. (*CP* 401)

Fichte writes of our knowledge of the world as a point extending out into space and of the imagination as a wavering between the point's origin in us and the beyond.¹³ This wavering is reinterpreted by Hegel as reflection, the medium of speculative science.¹⁴ The wavering of reflection is present in Stevens' poetry; in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” for example, he writes: “The world was a shore, whether sound or form / Or light, the relic of farewells, / Rock, of valedictory echoings, / To which his imagination returned, / From which it sped, a bar in space” (*CP* 179). The “bar in space” wavers between the solid and the unfixd: it is a solid bar but also the shore line; a line of musical notation on the page but also the wavering tones of the music through the air. The point is to grasp letting go of the grasp and to let go, just as the waves of the sea grasp the shoreline, creating the shoreline, and recede.

Without the genitive, thought becomes reified, self-certain, fixed (in bronze decor). Its meaning then eludes us. It appears wholly separate from us, unattainable, like the bird's song. We try to grasp at it, but without reflecting on the nature of our grasping we tend to catch only the stilled version of thought. However spiritual that thought appears to be, instead of being conception it is a preconception, and it is likely to arise as the familiar in our future interpretations. “We reason of these things with later reason / And we make of what we see, what we see clearly / And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.” Such familiarity, as Hegel would say, is “one-sided.” Just as for Fichte the intellect is a reservoir of facts, for Hegel and Stevens the intellect—later reason—makes of what we see “a place dependent on ourselves.” But that feeling of being at home, that new immediacy, is the later thing. It is not by itself spirit. If we cling ideologically to the familiar, we cannot engender. As Stevens writes, “so poisonous / Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to / The truth itself” (*CP* 381). Reason, later reason, may repair the disjunction inherent in always merely knowing “of” being(s), making a world dependent on ourselves. But this does not make us happy or unhappy. “You know then that it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy” (*OP* 141). Just as the

familiar is not spirit, neither is the mere act of synthesis spirit. If one takes Hegel's spirit to be that synthesizing act, to be an act of reason that repairs opposites, heals them, unites them, connects the metaphorical image to its meaning, absolves difference in transparency, then Stevens cannot be understood to be writing of what Hegel wrote, since the primary implication in "Of Mere Being" has not been disclosed. But if one takes Hegel's spirit to be the unending movement of immediacy, alienation, and synthesis, then my comparison of Hegel's and Stevens' symbols, their supreme fictions, is apt. They both stand in opposition to a reasoning that grasps and thinks it has it, once and for all. Our disaffection with what we have grasped is expressed in what Stevens writes of desire: "It knows that what it has is what is not / And throws it away like a thing of another time, / As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep" (CP 382).

Just as the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* brings us back to sense-certainty, Stevens' poem is spiritually, sensuously certain of mere being. We might say of it what Stevens says in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
 For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
 Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
 To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
 From that ever-early candor to its late plural. . . (CP 382)

CONCLUSION

The palm at the end of the mind rises. The bird sings a foreign song. Although they appear to point to a beyond, the images really point to their end, to how they are incomplete. In doing so the images point to the genitive, to that "beginning from dual" from which they arose and from which multiple interpretations of them flow. "[T]hat's the difference: in the end and the way / To the end. Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end" (CP 469). The poem is apocalyptic in that it uncovers and celebrates how imperfection, properly understood, is complete: the poem expresses Stevens' view that "The imperfect is our paradise."

I have tried to show how in "Of Mere Being" we find absolute conception an expression of supreme fiction. I have also tried to show how the supreme fiction cannot be understood without appreciating the genitive character, a character initially revealed in the symbol and in the proliferation of referents that the symbolic involves. I have shown that we can go back to Hegel to find a dialectic of the symbol that helps us to understand the poem. Our relationship to Hegel as to Stevens is intended to be engendering: we need not be stuck in our later reasonings about Stevens and his poem, or Hegel and his *Begriff*. Stevens, like Hegel, challenges us to put into practice what we too often consent to at a merely theoretical level.

That is, he challenges us to see beyond the simple subject-object divide, to enter into relation with being as it becomes. In order to do this we must carry on beyond mere proliferation of referents as an explanation of being. We must carry on—or rather, be carried with, be metaphorically awakened to—the relationship at the heart of mere being. “The truth itself, the first idea becomes / The hermit in a poet’s metaphors, / Who comes and goes and comes and goes all day” (CP 381).¹⁵

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Notes

¹Hegel’s criticism of this sort of valuating, quantitative thinking is evident when he writes about the virtue of philosophy over mathematics: “with non-actual things like the objects of mathematics, neither concrete sense-intuition nor philosophy has the least concern. In a non-actual element like this there is only a truth of the same sort, i.e. rigid, dead propositions” (Preface, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 26).

²Some history may be of interest here in order to place Hegel’s view. Kant held “It must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 152–53). He felt that the self was constitutive of and concomitantly present in any object of consciousness. But he did not hold that the self was constituted by the object. Fichte, a student of Kant’s and a teacher of Hegel’s, used the term *Wechselwirkung* or “interdetermination” to express the play between self and its object (see *The Science of Knowledge* 193). Interdetermination comes close to what we are getting at here, though Fichte does not hold that the self is constituted out of this interplay. Kant had also described a wavering play of the imagination in the experience of the beautiful (see *Critique of Judgement*, “Analytic of the Beautiful” 43–95). That notion comes closer to what Schelling and the early Hegel were getting at when they talked about the sundering Absolute, an Absolute that divides itself into subject and object, thereby creating both. (For a discussion of the sundering Absolute see “Comparison of Schelling’s Principle of Philosophy with Fichte’s” in Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* 155–73.) But Hegel does not stay with Schelling’s account of the sundering Absolute. In subsequent years in Jena, he develops the notion in terms of spirit, finalizing it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. What I am referring to in the present article is a sundering that is an essential part of the construction of the self as well as of the object, since for Hegel the one takes shape through the other. To see this sundering at work in Hegel, one should turn to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

³This is the title of Thomas Nagel’s book *The View from Nowhere*.

⁴For Hegel there is no transcendent, incommunicable truth. In fact, he is quite adamant that any attempt to reach beyond what can be expressed and interpreted is of little or no value:

for although the common opinion is that it is just the *ineffable* that is the most excellent, yet this opinion, cherished by conceit, is unfounded, since what is ineffable is, in truth, only something obscure, fermenting, something which gains clarity only when it is able to put itself into words. Accordingly, the word gives to thoughts their highest and truest existence. (Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Mind* 221)

⁵Hegel's *Aesthetik* was published posthumously. The book is a collection of his lectures, composed mainly of transcripts made by his audience.

⁶According to Hegel it is in classical art that art finds its perfect form.

⁷See Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System* 105.

⁸There are a number of ways in which Hegel's account of conscious symbolism does not help us to understand Stevens (or does so only negatively). For instance, according to Hegel, comparative symbolic forms are merely accessory; they serve the "purely subjective enlivenment of the meaning," aiding the artist's "subjective inventions" by giving external shape to them (*Aesthetics* 396). It would be wrong to understand Stevens' bowl in "The Poems of Our Climate" or the palm and bird in "Of Mere Being" as mere "accessories" to "subjective invention." First, it is never explicit that there is a comparison of any sort happening in either poem. "Of Mere Being" never tells us that the bird or palm is like something that Stevens cannot otherwise put his fingers on. Second, the fact that the title is of "mere" being is not an invitation to consider the palm and bird as accessories to Being; the term "mere" suggests a return to something fundamental, not to insignificance. Finally, one feels less that what is at issue here is merely *subjective* inventiveness. The poem's obscurities and ambiguities compel us to inquire into the nature of poetic construction.

⁹Cook notes "Stevens' precision and sophistication in this [in enigma] as in other generic areas" (Cook 16). She cites Stevens' own words: "The enigmatical / Beauty of each beautiful enigma / Becomes amassed in a total double-thing. / We do not know what is real and what is not" (CP 472).

¹⁰I am skipping Hegel's account of allegory in the *Aesthetics*. For Hegel an allegory is coldly emblematic, and a certain transparency has to prevail. Neither of these things can be said of "Of Mere Being."

¹¹Jacqueline Vaught Brogan provides an interesting discussion of metaphor and simile in Stevens. See her *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language*.

¹²In his *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Mind* Hegel calls it "the nightly mine" (*die Naechtlliche Schacht*) (9).

¹³See Fichte's "Deduction of Presentation" in *The Science of Knowledge* 203–18.

¹⁴See the Preface to Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* 1–45.

¹⁵A version of this article was presented at the International Association for Philosophy and Literature conference, Mobile, Alabama, May 6–10, 1997. I would like to thank Dr. Jan Zwicky (University of Victoria, B.C.) for her very helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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“The Statue at the World’s End”: Monumental Art as Apocalypse

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It was allowed to breathe life into this statue so that the statue of the beast was able to speak, and to have anyone who refused to worship the statue of the beast put to death. He compelled everyone—small and great, rich and poor, slave and citizen—to be branded on the right hand or on the forehead, and made it illegal for anyone to buy and sell anything unless he had been branded with the name of the beast or with the number of its name.

There is no need for shrewdness here: if anyone is clever enough he may interpret the number of the beast: it is the number of a man, the number 666.

—Revelation 13:15–18 (Bierlein, *Parallel Myths* 252)

All around the world statues crumble for me.

—Sugar Ray

IN “OWL’S CLOVER” CONFLICTS occur between the physical context of a statue and its effect upon those around it; Stevens questions the creator’s vision of monumental dominion. The statue’s position is brash; it presents an argument that reveals the artist’s “manner” by way of its formal stance. “Manner is something that has not yet been disengaged adequately. It does not mean style; it means the attitude of the writer, his bearing rather than his point of view,” Stevens says in “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (*OP* 227). “Owl’s Clover” deconstructs the styles of statues, offering the reader insight into the manner of their creators, revealing the exclusivity of singular vision in collective environments.

“Owl’s Clover” is about the statue as a civic art form that is individually designed to meet the many. The poem’s five sections work at diagnosing the ineffectual art forms of the past and present in order to create something new in response to “the pressure of the contemporaneous” (*OP* 230). In the mid-1930s, the Depression depleted the public spirit. In presenting this dilemma, Stevens begins with the inadequacy of a romantic park monument that further alienates a destitute old woman and con-

cludes with the artistic figure of the “subman,” whose creations attempt to answer the public’s dreams and nightmares.

The poet’s challenge of finding “what will suffice” (CP 240) for “the many” is at a simple level a problem of numbers, of reaching those “Artificial Populations.” The first three sections of “Owl’s Clover” demonstrate the wrong-headedness of singular vision as it is imposed on others. My focus here is the second section, “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” the title referring to a Marxist reviewer and his relationship to art in the 1930s. Later, I will expand on Stanley Burnshaw’s role in the poem as a critic reviewing Stevens’ poetry. For now I propose that the singular identity of Mr. Burnshaw¹ in the title has led to interpretive problems because readers assume that Stevens is strictly responding to Burnshaw about his negative review of *Ideas of Order*. There is that aspect, but “Owl’s Clover” more ambitiously confronts the challenge of creating art for the public. As such, each of Stevens’ tropes outgrows individual identity when it meets different contexts.² The Statue is the obvious case in point, and I suggest that Mr. Burnshaw is a trope for the Marxist reviewer’s predicament of sustaining his political cause while evaluating literature. In this sense Mr. Burnshaw’s position resembles that of an owl looking down on a multitude of clover.

Stevens complicates Burnshaw’s political position by parodying the romantic idealism of Marxism, especially the contradiction between utopia and the literary realism that attempts to define it. The poem argues that firm identity and static positions are false reductions. Paul de Man’s principle of rhetoricity, “the recurrent confusion of sign and substance” (135),³ helps us to understand Stevens’ use of figures such as Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue, which appear as singular signifiers but come to embody large amorphous tropes. The readers’ tendency automatically to identify Mr. Burnshaw strictly as the critical reviewer could explain why in 1937 Stevens completely removed Burnshaw from the poem, retitling it “The Statue at the World’s End” for a larger apocalyptic forecast about contemporary art.⁴

The poem was written in 1935–36 when literary journals such as *The New Masses* and *Partisan Review* published radical left-wing verse and also featured well-known modernist authors in efforts to broaden their political range. Stevens admired the purpose of Marxism but not its divisive methods or fervor. He perceived Marxist literature as less than innovative; it was “just a new romanticism” as he wrote in a letter (L 351; emphasis added). “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue” portrays the monumental romance that is often hidden in Marxism. In response to “the pressure of the contemporaneous” Stevens searched for an innovative art to meet the spirit of American citizens without belittling them through a monumental aesthetic. “Owl’s Clover” uses rhetorical language to show how style reveals manner and how artistic creation is inextricable from political argument.

Perceived divisions between aesthetic and polemical literary modes are responsible for much of the critical discrepancy around this poem. Early readers of Stevens were accustomed to the beautiful wordplay of 1923's *Harmonium*. Twelve years later, Howard Baker said of *Ideas of Order*: "This obviously is dipped from the same clear spring from which *Harmonium* came" (96).⁵ A year later, in 1936, "Owl's Clover" offered long discursive cantos in various styles without a reliable poetic voice, yet with undeniable political references. Critics have attempted to sort out the poet's intentions, and despite the quantity of literature written about Stevens, the debate over this poem continues in the nineties. Milton Bates and Helen Vendler criticize Kermode and Richardson's *Collected Poetry and Prose of Wallace Stevens* because the full version of "Owl's Clover," published as a book in 1936, is placed near the back of the book with Stevens' juvenilia in a section entitled "Uncollected Poems." Yet the crucial studies of the poem by Alan Filreis and James Longenbach show that "Owl's Clover" reveals more about Stevens' attitudes to sociopolitical culture than any other work. Because there is so much in store, critics have contentiously tried to dig out clearer statements than offered in the poem. Filreis, in *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (1994), suggests that in "Owl's Clover," the poet was "trying to create when he *should* have been arguing" (229). Filreis counters Joseph Riddel's 1965 reading, in *The Clairvoyant Eye*, that opts for creation over argument. Riddel represents the vast majority of Stevens' critics, as recent as Eleanor Cook in 1988, who deem Stevens' political satire, especially "Owl's Clover," "a dead end" (120). This critical oscillation makes room for my position that Stevens' rhetorical poetry collapses the division, evidenced by Riddel and Filreis, between "creation" and "argument."

The first section of "Owl's Clover," "The Old Woman and the Statue," presents a romantic statue of marble horses in a park towering over a destitute old woman. The poem dramatizes the cold exclusivity of the statue and its elite ineffectuality in the Depression. The Statue is dramatized as the sculptor's creation. The sculptor's romantic vision is presented in chiefly aesthetic terms, until the Statue confronts the old woman, who is spiritually oppressed by the grandiloquent civic monument. The aesthetics of the Statue, sanctioned by the state, stands as an argument against the old woman because it reveals an elite romanticism that excludes her.

"Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" further conflates creation and argument, while bringing art and politics to the forefront of its performance. Stanley Burnshaw wrote a review of *Ideas of Order* entitled "Turmoil in the Middle Ground" for the leftist journal *New Masses*. The writing is full of an ideologue's assurance, as in these sentences that represent the gist of the review: "*Ideas of Order* is the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance. . . . Will Stevens sweep his contradictory notions into a valid Idea of Order?" (41-42).⁶ The very singlemindedness with which Burnshaw measures Stevens' "contra-

dictory notions" becomes the object of Stevens' rhetorical inquiry in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue." To say, however, that Stevens uses the poem chiefly as a retort to Burnshaw would be a mistake. Like "The Old Woman," "Mr. Burnshaw" is a construct for a contemporary predicament. As a political reviewer evaluating poetry, Burnshaw's position is tenuous. The assertion of a firm political stance in relation to art, the notion that politics can somehow address art in a non-aesthetic manner, is the subject addressed and parodied in the poem. As a romantic civic monument in "The Old Woman and the Statue," the symbolism of the Statue is varied in "Mr. Burnshaw" to become a Marxist icon. By reversing the Statue from state artifact to subversive icon, Stevens reverses his ideological critique, while parodying the supposition of automatic representability in both instances.

Following the exuberant closure of the preceding poem, "The Old Woman and the Statue"—"How clearly that would be defined!"—"Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" begins:

The thing is dead . . . Everything is dead
Except the future. Always everything
That is is dead except what ought to be.
All things destroy themselves or are destroyed. (*OP* 78)

The contrasting tones between this grounded opening and the lively termination of "The Old Woman" are no accident. All "[t]hat is is dead except what ought to be" does not mourn the past as the only thing worthy of life; "what ought to be" speaks of the ideal future exempt from death because it is becoming. This theory of change is compatible with the Marxism of Burnshaw. Understandably, Filreis writes that the "voice of section i . . . belong[s] undoubtedly to the 'Mr. Burnshaw' of the title" (231). Yet the ideas and rhetoric are characteristically Stevensian. There are no quotation marks, italics, or ironies suggesting an alternative speaker. These four lines represent Stevens' theory of flux, which also applies to his employment of symbols: they are temporary representations that die the moment they attain fixity; once named, they are no longer living in change. Stevens finds middle ground with Burnshaw, the writer of "Turmoil in the Middle Ground," by incorporating a Marxist politic into his poetics of change.

By this I do not mean that the poem is a diplomatic gesture. Instead I suggest that this poem continues to problematize the notion of fixed symbolic identity that was at work in both the old woman and the statue figures. Much of the criticism on "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" works to locate variant voices of Stevens and Burnshaw in the poem. Critics as far apart as Hi Simons and Alan Filreis have discussed the whereabouts of the voices of Stevens and Burnshaw according to stanzas.⁷ Although these stationings make for good argument and activate the poem within the political history of the 1930s, claiming autonomous voice within mass social movement is being parodied here (as we will also see in Stevens' parody

of Marxist inscription “*To Be Itself*” (OP 83), written on stone to assert permanent identity). Since Stevens is *responding* to a leftist reviewer, the critical urge is to ground the poem within the actual circumstances that surround it. However, if Stevens wanted merely to argue with Stanley Burnshaw, he would have found a more direct way, such as a letter. Stevens was stimulated by the predicament posed by the critic. Just as the Old Woman functioned as a symbol of the Depression, Burnshaw’s leftist involvement as a poet, editor, and reviewer represented the social implications of poetry’s confluence with politics. The poem enacts its predicament and in so doing uses Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue as paradigms for the social critique then required. Both figures are assertively defined (ideologically and aesthetically) and their fixity leaves no room for compromise. Stevens sees artificial closure in such stances, which bring apocalyptic results as the poem demonstrates.

The challenge for Stevens is to relocate poetry in this demanding time. He invokes the age-old agents of mystery, the muses:

Come, all celestial paramours,
Whether in-dwelling haughty clouds, frigid
And crisply musical, or holy caverns temple-toned,
Entwine your arms and moving to and fro,
Now like a ballet infantine in awkward steps,
Chant sibillant requiems for this effigy. (OP 79)

Where “The Idea of Order at Key West” emptied its muse from the newly ordered trope of mysterious spirit, here Stevens saturates the muses, demanding their trope be the thickest of containers for the present. This second section loads reverent ornaments hyperbolically, building irony as the poem continues:

Bring down from nowhere nothing’s wax-like blooms,
Calling them what you will but loosely-named
In a mortal lullaby, like porcelain. (OP 79)

Indeed, transcendence is monumentalized here and in the subsequent vision of a perfectly present Platonic apple, until the section’s final line quells any doubts about irony: “But this gawky plaster will not be here” (OP 79). So the Statue’s enduring material representation of transcendent ambitions is denied. The poet continues, however, ironically to load the muses as collective bodies of poetic tradition. But before full comment or resolution can be made, before the poem makes definition of the present, section III moves to the future, saying of the Statue:

The stones
That will replace it shall be carved, “*The Mass*
Appoints These Marbles Of Itself To Be”

Itself." No more than that, no subterfuge,
No memorable muffing, bare and blunt. (OP 80)

This hyperbole of Marxist definition is juxtaposed against the excessive celestial rhetoric of transcendence accorded to the paramours. Stevens answers Burnshaw's request for direct commentary on the real by hoisting up another monument. The ridicule of the inscription is derived from its simple definition, the most direct approach of all. Stevens' irony works through the pomp and circumstance of this "Mass" appointment, which is itself because it says it is. No genesis, no subjective qualification, no desire in this mass rhetoric, just definition—which Stevens also offered ironically at the visionary end of "The Old Woman and the Statue." In both cases, aesthetic definition of the present hyperbolically reveals the utopias that each aesthetic relies upon, thereby creating parody. Although "The Old Woman" faces an apocalyptic romanticism at the foot of the statue, the Marxist mass inscription itself is utopic. In its efforts to deny idealistic aesthetics, it sounds like the horseman of the apocalypse: "On his cloak and on his thigh there was a name written: The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:11–22). Stevens is not criticizing communism itself, but rather the demand for an aesthetic of automatic fixed identity, for mimetic realism. Stevens shows that the result of the Marxist call for "crusted outlines hot and huge with fact" (OP 79) is apocalyptic at the flaming end of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue."⁸

Continuing the dialectic, section IV is addressed to "Mesdames," and this is where the poetic voice becomes more pensive now that the rhetorical parameters have been drawn. Section III's Marxist rhetoric that is automatic for the people is contrasted here:

Mesdames, one might believe that Shelley lies
Less in the stars than in their earthy wake,
Since the radiant disclosures that you make
Are of an eternal vista, manqué and gold
And brown, an Italy of the mind, a place
Of fear before the disorder of the strange,
A time in which the poets' politics
Will rule in a poets' world. (OP 80)

The "Mesdames" trope shakes up the aesthetic stereotypes of the thirties. It is difficult to identify exactly who "Mesdames" are. They are certainly addressees of this poem, in this case a crowd of Shelley enthusiasts, who therefore are familiar with his "Defence of Poetry" credo, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Since legislative power is at issue in this poem, it follows that the Marxists' automatic realism is drawn into this "Mesdames" section following the above quoted lines. Nevertheless, the Shelleyan music opposes the "bare, blunt" rhetoric of "To Be Itself" Marxism, so that Stevens conflates these apparently dispar-

ate aesthetics in "Mesdames." On November 26, 1935, after writing "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" but still to write the rest of "Owl's Clover," Stevens explains his musical thinking to his publisher, Ronald Lane Latimer. Though specifically referring to "To the One of Fictive Music," his comments seem equally applicable to "Mesdames":

The music of poetry which creates its own fictions is one of the "sisterhood of the living dead." It is a muse: all of the muses are of that sisterhood. But then I cannot say, at this distance of time, that I specifically meant the muses; this is just an explanation. I don't think that I meant anything definitely except all the things that live in memory and imagination. (L 297)

Since the muses are "just an explanation," the critic's task is to see what is living in the "memory and imagination" of the poem's muses; that is, how these paramours work as trope. I suggest that the variable "Mesdames" include muses, Marxists, poets, readers—a veritable carnival. "Mesdames," as with the Old Woman and Mr. Burnshaw, is a "variable symbol," as described in "The Irrational Element in Poetry." However, I find that the word "symbol" does not account for the fluidity of these tropes, which "collect in pools," as Stevens says of thought (*OP* 196).

The above letter's refusal to define the poet's muses is counterbalanced by the more telling remark in a letter to Hi Simons that "Communism is just a new romanticism" (L 351). Section IV synthesizes the Marxist-romantic dialectic enforced by Burnshaw's review. One side of Stevens' dialectic categorizes mystic paramours in flowing glorious rhetoric. Opposing that are the Marxists, hard, "bare and blunt." Contrasting the masculine mass marble inscription of section III, the opening rhetoric of section IV returns to an astral Shelley who is brought down to earth by "Mesdames." The synthesis parodies both sides, as Shelley is paradoxically grounded by their "eternal," "radiant disclosures." Stevens shows that an apparent grounding of an idea can itself be a transcendent, "Italy of the mind," which is a pejorative romanticism that Stevens otherwise proclaimed dead in "Anglais Mort à Florence." Here it is immediately followed by existential fear: "a place / Of fear before the disorder of the strange." By conflating the romantic aesthetics of Shelley and Italy with the naked fear of the thirties, Stevens suggests that any such projected escapes from fear are romanticizations. Burnshaw's socialism, then, is the sublime idealization of the thirties. Stevens goes so far as to say "Marx has ruined Nature, / For the moment" (*CP* 134) in "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)." Just like the romantic ideal of nature, the communist dream becomes a monster trope projecting "A time in which the poets' politics / Will rule in a poets' world." This sentence sentences Mr. Burnshaw and Stevens together with "Mesdames." In with the muses under the "Mesdames" umbrella are the Marxists and the poets, who all create politics out of loneliness, fear, desperation, and idealism.

Stevens further complicates the poet's predicament:

Yet that will be
A world impossible for poets, who
Complain and prophesy, in their complaints,
And are never of the world in which they live. (OP 80)

Stevens' critique is likely self-referential and certainly directed at poet-critic Burnshaw, as this letter attests in its reference to *New Masses*, the locale of Burnshaw's review:

MASSES is just one more wailing place and the whole left now-a-days is a mob of wailers. I do very much believe in leftism in every direction, even in wailing. These people go about it in such a way that nobody listens to them except themselves; and that is at least one reason why they get nowhere. They have the most magnificent cause in the world. (L 287)

As a response to the thirties, Stevens' poem supports the constructive (yet harsh) criticism of that letter. In the poem's melding of socialism with romance, progress inadvertently arises regardless of the literati:

Disclose the rude and ruddy at their jobs
And if you weep for peacocks that are gone
Or dance the death of doves, most sallowly,
Who knows? The ploughman may not live alone. . . .
(OP 80)

Despite his parody of Burnshaw's romantic socialism, Stevens optimistically believes in change, except that he does not propose a plan:

If ploughmen, peacocks, doves alike
In vast disorder live in the ruins, free,
The charts destroyed, even disorder may,
So seen, have an order of its own, a peace
Not now to be perceived yet order's own. (OP 80)

Only by destroying the past's "charts," those ideals that navigated disaster, is there hope for a new order. Stevens displays an American anarchism here (still rampant today) that believes in the future (less likely now), a confidence that order will be recast from the ruins. This belief in inevitable change is what makes America so violent and bountifully productive; it is anti-conservative, as the wonderful poetry of section V illustrates:

At some gigantic, solitary urn,
A trash can at the end of the world, the dead
Give up dead things and the living turn away.
There buzzards pile their sticks among the bones

Of buzzards and eat the bellies of the rich,
Fat with a thousand butters, and the crows
Sip the wild honey of the poor man's life,
The blood of his bitter brain; and there the sun
Shines without fire on columns intercrossed,
White slapped on white, majestic, marble heads,
Severed and tumbled into seedless grass,
Motionless, knowing neither dew nor frost. (*OP* 80–81)

These lines sound both proletariat and bourgeois, but there is no difference between the parasitism of either class's politics, which entails apocalyptic results.

Stevens' view of change does not discriminate; it depends upon generations:

The colorless light in which this wreckage lies
Has faint, portentous lustres, shades and shapes
Of rose, or what will once more rise to rose,
When younger bodies, because they are younger, rise
And chant the rose-points of their birth, and when
For a little time, again, rose-breasted birds
Sing rose-beliefs. (*OP* 81)

"[R]ise to rose" parodies Christianity by drawing this rose from a "trash can at the end of the world," and so the cycle continues. Flux is signified by the singular vowel change in "rise to rose," which also changes from verb to noun, emphasizing a dynamic grammar. The "rose-points of their birth" are similar to Eliot's "still point of the turning world" (177), except Stevens sets his image within moving chanting bodies. Stevens' hope is that the next generation will articulate itself fully, completely, in language and in body. However, within that hope, the repetition of "rose" nears absurdity, especially since it is gleaned from past wreckage. Generational cyclicity, "the pleasures of merely circulating," continually resurface in Stevens, and it is debatable whether there is more optimism or fatalism in these successive returns. Inevitability is the point about change in Stevens' poetry; sometimes the consequences are disastrous, sometimes harmonious. In this case, the dynamic young bodies sound, appear, and are contextualized in harmonious flux. They jibe with Stevens' poetics, rather than force or forge a monumentally fixed aesthetic or situation. Consequently, the often ironic verse gives way to basic, easy moving, cyclical life. When Stevens breaks from irony, he often finishes poems with these optimistic life rhythms.

Stressing the reductive dialectics that this poem works to dispel, section V continues and ends with opposing energies that are transcendently immaterial in the face of generational change:

Above that urn two lights
Commingle, not like the commingling of sun and moon
At dawn, nor of summer-light and winter-light
In an autumn afternoon, but two immense
Reflections, whirling apart and wide away. (*OP* 81)

These forces remain distanced "Reflections," and as intentionally vague as they are, their airiness is set against the natural marriages of "sun and moon / At dawn," "summer-light and winter-light" in autumn. These marriages, following the chanting "rose-points" above, receive fuller treatment in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and work into Stevens' poetics of generational change.

Within this section, the "two lights / Commingle," but not in a cycle of reproductive harmony. However, just as "The Idea of Order at Key West" proclaims the sea is not a mask while summoning that mimetic relation, the negative denial represented by these lights is undermined by the positivity of the surrounding similes. I suggest these lights recall the dialectics of section IV that contrasted, compared, and coalesced romance and socialism (muses and Marxists). As we will see shortly, section VI further corroborates this link with its repeated "whirling." Here in section V, Stevens pejoratively contextualizes these contemporary energies as "Reflections, whirling apart and wide away." In doing so, he locates the positions of the poet and critic as "whirling apart." This disparate motion is not a true dialectic, although they "commingle" inadvertently above the trash that they reflect. The natural generation of sun, moon, summer, winter takes precedence over the differences of the two lights: they are made arbitrary by their distant abstract motion that fades away while natural cycles continue.

Section VI also addresses "Mesdames" and continues to emphasize change while retracing much of the poem's traveled ground. The recollection and acknowledgment of the political impasse between camps is "renamed a united front against stasis," as Filreis states (234). The "united front" consists of the romantic-socialist, poet-critic dialectic Stevens continues to quash. "Mesdames" face a potential enemy that ends up looking similar to themselves:

Shall you [Mesdames],
Then, fear a drastic community evolved
From the whirling, slowly and by trial; or fear
Men gathering for a mighty flight of men,
An abyssal migration into a possible blue? (*OP* 82)

The "whirling" of the two lights in section V continues here, including on one side the revolutionary "drastic community . . . whirling, slowly and by trial"; the other side of the semicolon presents an elite crew of artists who simultaneously evolve in formation. Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of*

Order spoofs the notion that the elites “have all tramped off to some escapist limbo where they are joyously gathering moonshine.” Burnshaw’s parody is not a criticism of Stevens; rather, he recognizes Stevens’ potential to be, but avoidance from being a “cliché . . . of left-wing criticism” (“Wallace Stevens and the Statue” 363). In this sense, Burnshaw’s rhetoric parodies stereotypical leftist rhetoric in a way that is similar to Stevens’ technique in the poem. Stevens satirizes the cliché of escapism as a flight into the blue, which is his color of pure imagination, here contextualized within a masculine “abysmal migration.” Further uniting these tropic communities is the twice-mentioned “fear” of “Mesdames.” As an ironic “intelligence that endures” (*NA* 52), these muses mystically hover as a collective trope for everybody in the poem. They fear and include both the elite transcendent tradition of poetry as well as the contemporary revolutionaries. So the end of section VI posits a rhetorically fearful either/or standoff for “Mesdames,” whose answer must be to fear neither and both.

Section VII changes the poem’s tenor from group synthesis to saturated confrontation. “Mesdames” become grassroots “damsels” circling the statue in childlike defiance. If we recall the new generation chanting its “rose-points,” then a link between youth, language, nature, and revolution would ascribe power to the future of the left. The poet asks the damsels to “cry,”

This time, like damsels captured by the sky,
Seized by that possible blue. Be maidens formed
Of the most evasive hue of a lesser blue,
Of the least appreciable shade of green
And despicable shades of red, just seen,
And vaguely to be seen, a matinal red. . . . (*OP* 83)

Stevens’ symbolism of color engages in a dance parodying its hierarchical representations. Pure “blue” is degraded to an earthy green and finally “a matinal red,” an adjective that the *OED* traces to the Church of England’s morning prayer, and alas, bird song. As the damsels embody matinal religious innocence “[t]hat enter[s] day from night,” red for Stevens is transversely a color of passionate “despicable” irritation. Here, red embodies the folksy damsels, the socialist muses defacing state capital:

Let your golden hands wave fastly and be gay
And your braids bear brightening of crimson bands.
Conceive that while you dance the statue falls,
The heads are severed, topple, tumble, tip
In the soil and rest. Conceive that marble men
Serenely selves, transfigured by the selves
From which they came, make real the attitudes
Appointed for them and that the pediment
Bears words that are the speech of marble men. (*OP* 83)

As the musical birdies turn into social revolutionaries Stevens endorses their collective action. After imploding the dichotomy between the blue elites and the red scourges, the poem reissues the dialectically polarized “marble men” following the caesura that marks their very destruction. In this manner, Stevens first kills the fictive statue trope by pointing to its fallibility, buries it, and with no mourning, reconstructs its fictional potency. Having then established a potent poetry able to destroy the statue, the poet quickly regenerates a parallel fulfillment with the “marble men,” already subverted. In doing this, Stevens shows how change concurs in different groups, for different purposes: “Conceive that marble men . . . make real the attitudes / Appointed for them” (*OP* 83). “Appointed” is repeated from the opposing Marxist inscription of section III, and it also dominates here, but in reversed context. Previously the Marxists inscribed “*To Be Itself*” as their motto, whereas the “marble men” have attitudes “Appointed for them” as birthrights. As an enjambed verb, “Appointed” dominates the sentence just as the traditional (“marble men”) power appoints a new generation; furthermore, the prosody stresses the alliterative “pediment” bearing their appointed words. In this marble epithet Stevens displays just how arbitrarily power is monumentalized through inscribed social appointments. Meanwhile, the poetry’s syntactical and aural force rhetorically reinforces the content of the language it appoints. Stevens contrasts elite power with the arbitrary revolution inscribed by the earlier Marxist nomination. Both are automatically defined.

In section VII the statue falls at the feet of the dancing damsels while the “marble men” return. In the five lines discussed above, the gentry maintain an artful power that takes the damsels the rest of the section to claim. There may be some uncertainty regarding the identities of the “you” addressees that close the poem. I suggest that this confusion highlights the implosion of polarized identities. What was previously the “bare and blunt” Marxist inscription, “*To Be Itself*” “transforms / Itself into the speech of the spirit.” “[F]eelings [are] changed to sound,” and the revolutionary damsels become “Impassioned seducers and seduced.” Since they are “Speaking and strutting broadly, fair and bloomed” (*OP* 83), the address continues to be directed at the feminine crowd present for the poet’s oratory. However, this section constantly stokes the fire that ends it, and all of the personae of “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue” are thus consumed. The poem’s movement—from Marxist Mesdames, to the reflections that commingle yet whirl disparately, to the blues and reds, to the inclusion of the marble men within the updraft of the damsels—consistently implodes forces that depend upon each other for difference and distinction. All of a sudden at the end of the poem, though, their dynamism is consumed in fire. Uniting these forces is the utopic desire for self-expression, unitary identity, and determinate Truth: “*To Be Itself*.” The credo is a problem because of its automatically assumed nomination that instantly hardens flux into the artistic monument awaiting subsequent destruction. The last lines

of the poem present numerous crystallizations that are troubled by automatism: "And are your feelings changed to sound, without / A change" (OP 83). Without real change, representational change arises, and because there is glory in representation, art will continue to strut itself into purgation

until the waterish ditherings turn
To the tense, the maudlin, true meridian
That is yourselves, when, at last, you are yourselves,
Speaking and strutting broadly, fair and bloomed,
No longer of air but of the breathing earth,
Impassioned seducers and seduced, the pale
Pitched into swelling bodies, upward, drift
In a storm blown into glittering shapes, and flames
Wind-beaten into freshest, brightest fire. (OP 83)

The "change" as a form of representation is encumbered by "waterish ditherings." These precisely sound like nothing because water represents the ongoing flux that washes all supposed changes away. The antinomies of the poem find the "true meridian" through "the maudlin," which points to the debased then repentant Mary Magdalene, as well as the tearful remorse of drunkenness (OED). Stevens traces the movement of uncontained flux into resolute form in a variety of ways here, which are all somewhat cheap and pejorative, as if the formation of ecstasy is too easily acquired. For instance, fear and "tense" desperation, when fleshed out via self-representation, become the strutting peacock of the divinely natural earth. With "Impassioned seducers and seduced" Stevens simplifies the monumental process of those desperately in need succumbing to the proclamation "*To Be Itself*." Such an occasion is couched as a bodily sacrifice wherein the subjects are consumed "into glittering shapes." The aesthetic crystallization acquires the energy of the weather, which for Stevens is the constant change of nature. The poem ends with the violent ecstasy of a beatific vision, which is uncharacteristic of Stevens' poetics. This inevitable fusion manifests apocalypse as the result of the poem's imperative to consolidate disparate groups.

Perhaps Stevens' severing of section VII from the 1937 edition of "Owl's Clover" admits that his desire to implode polarized groups is as destructive as each community can be. Stevens shows that the search for definition is ultimately an ideal, like any other, that will be destroyed pending its establishment. This burning follows an aesthetic similar to the exact apocalyptic definition that ironically closed "The Old Woman and the Statue." In that poem irony was luxuriously maintained because the sculptor was an easy enemy for the reader to pit against the Old Woman. In "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" doom awaits everybody. It is especially destructive because the participants in the apocalypse create the situation

that cancels each other out. (This nuclear vision involving Mr. Burnshaw and the State coincides with the cold war politics evolving in the States—the demonization of red communism, such as in Burnshaw's *New Masses*, by true blue patriots.)⁹ The forecast's "satire" is not weak, but overbearing. As disturbing as the poem's denouement is, the destructive Nietzschean dynamic meshes with Stevens' poetics of change that depend upon generational cyclicity. In this case the "All things destroy themselves or are destroyed" theory is especially grim because, first, the personae are actual contemporaries, as well as apparent future hopefuls, and second, Stevens' generational poetics usually depend upon harmonious reproduction. It is not difficult to see why readers objected to this poem and Stevens chopped this section from the 1937 version of "Owl's Clover."

Coinciding with idealism's quick destruction is the abrupt style of the poem here. Usually a patient poet of process, Stevens hastily collects his kindling in order to burn it. The final proclamations are cast in a presentative style, but the scene is once removed by the poet's hypothetical stance. It pretends to function in the manner of the Imagist style of presentation over representation. For example, the poetic voice demands that "*To Be Itself*" be repeated until it "transforms / Itself into the speech of the spirit." We are not witness to the transformation, as we were when the maidens performed a ritual of changing colors, ending with a toppled statue. Perhaps the forced style of the ending fits with the imposed crystalline aesthetics: both are debased with pretensions toward transcendence. We read a proclaimed poetics (like "Of Modern Poetry") that wants to transform speech to spirit, feeling to sound, and seducers to seduced (and all the vice-versas thereof). "Of Modern Poetry" states that poetry *must* "learn the speech of the place" and be "of a man skating, . . . a woman / Combing" (CP 240). But the statement of those imperatives in that instance means that such performances cannot be achieved in that poem. In making proclamations Stevens writes "constatively," to use J. L. Austin's distinction (which amounts to much the same thing as "representation").¹⁰ Through most of the poem Stevens "performs" romantic seductions while "presenting" cases in point. He argues that the left operates by romantic performative methods, even though it supposes constative truths. "Owl's Clover" does not fall short in its satire, as Cook says; it dissembles when its satiric irony and parody are forsaken for the sake of a "temple-tone" already knocked. Perhaps the Marxist apocalypse is not a "justification" at all, but a rhetorical portrait of a social movement doomed to the same romantic destructive end that closed "The Old Woman and the Statue."

It is not surprising that Stevens cut section VII, as it demonstrates the destruction of a too fast, automatic idealism. Its rhetoric of transcendence gets ensnared between a self-conscious "rhetoricity" and full-blown apocalypse. Ultimately for Stevens' poetics, the power of that depicted *failure* succeeds because it serves as a warning to extreme idealism, an example of what happens when static rigidity is consumed in dynamic process. By

ending the revised 1937 edition with section VI, however, the poem hangs on the question put to “you,” the variable Mesdames: “Shall you, / Then, fear a drastic community evolved / From the whirling, slowly and by trial; or fear / Men gathering . . . / into a possible blue?” (OP 82). This open ending deposits fear for readers to consider amidst the dialectic of leftists and patriarchal aesthetes (who are purposefully conflated). This ending evolves performatively in section VI, only asking about an answer, rather than passing down doom as does section VII.

Ending with section VI is a more typically irresolute Stevens denouement, allowing the statue to remain intact because the beautifully destructive damsels are no longer in the poem. These cuts effectively tone down Stevens’ politically subversive stance, which opposes both Marxist idealism and State dominion by mutually imploding them. Stevens also omits the satiric first line of section V: “A solemn voice, not Mr. Burnshaw’s says” and the section goes from there to present the “trash can at the end of the world” (OP 80–81). This omission censors Stevens’ view that Burnshaw’s politics are too shortsighted to envision doomful scavenging and hopeful regeneration. Further contributing to the watered-down revised edition is the complete removal of section IV. This is the crucial section suggesting that “a place / Of fear before the disorder of the strange,” such as 1930s America, triggers a “poets’ politics.” Section IV amalgamates Shelley, poets who “Complain and prophesy” (like Burnshaw) and workers, all under the “Mesdames” umbrella, where disorder and uncertainty lead to idealistic projections. However incredible it seems, Mr. Burnshaw is completely removed from the poem’s content, and it is retitled “The Statue at the World’s End.”¹¹

Samuel French Morse writes in his introduction to *Opus Posthumous* that “Owl’s Clover” was omitted from *The Collected Poems* on the grounds of being too “‘rhetorical’ ” (xxiii). Going beyond that apparent criticism of the poetry, what might we say about Stevens’ decision to omit polemics, and what does that decision suggest about the cultural climate he wrote within? In the depressed thirties people scrambled to locate specific truths to help their economic situation. Meanwhile, Stevens writes a long poem about the rhetorical romanticism involved in that human quest for answers. Stevens deconstructed historical process as it was happening. As Stanley Burnshaw explains in his 1961 retrospective about his time at *The New Masses*, the journal’s political position wavered as it expanded to include literature not only by Stevens, but also by Hemingway, MacLeish, Saroyan, Dos Passos, Kenneth Burke,

to list some of the names familiar today. Controversies raged; the world of books had suddenly come alive with excitement. Audiences crowded into theatres and often argued out loud. Literature was reaching sectors of the population that one never

regarded as part of the reading public. And better still, they seemed to care. (359)

So much for historical notions of a society of elite artists unable to reach the public, which will take what it can get. The social angst beheld by artists of the thirties had likely more to do with the contemporary pressure to find answers for society. So, many artists turned to Marxist ideology. Burnshaw ironically presents himself in this light in the following third-person chronicle:

How to speak to such an audience? None of his associates was quite sure. . . . [T]hey were blind men leading the blind. But tentativeness and humility were unthinkable: the world was separating into two enemy camps and time was running out! One had to act in behalf of mankind, and for anyone with a brain there could be no choice. Like the rest of the intellectual Left, they moved in the serenity of certainty, naive examples of what Mann calls "the automatic tendency to believe that the intellect, by its very nature, takes its position . . . on the 'left,' that it is therefore essentially allied with the ideas of freedom, progress, humanity . . . a prejudice which has often been disproved." (358)

With Burnshaw's "mercy of distance" (Ondaatje 179) we not only catch a glimpse of the challenge of living in the thirties; we can also observe how historically accurate Stevens' conflation of a socialist-romantic aesthetic is in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," particularly section IV's "world impossible for poets, who / Complain and prophesy, in their complaints, / And are never of the world in which they live" (*OP* 80). This strong satire (the whole of section IV) was cut from the 1937 edition. A similar editing principle is observable in the change in title, which replaces the particular, local, and satiric bite of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" with the universalized, "The Statue at the World's End" in the 1937 version. By editing "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," Stevens negated much of the poem's dialectical critique. "The Statue at the World's End" reduces the previous constructive yet severe criticism that sees doom in the Mr. Burnshaw predicament in favor of a looming glance at utopian-apocalypse. Perhaps the revised poem comments in a more universal and diluted manner on the fearful feeling provoked by the era's economic and political climate. This cautious gesture attempted to appease critics, but it detracts from the rigor of Stevens' social analysis.

Burnshaw speaks of a similar desire to preserve the contemporary left-wing vision for the sake of public followers, regardless of the outcome:

This startling experience, this sense of direct relationship with one's readers, was not only new in American letters; it could

go far to sustain those writers within the Left who were wrestling with their private angels. The reviewer of Stevens, for example. In his darker moments, he would confront his own misgivings about the glory of the life-to-come in the stateless utopia. It would be ushered in, of course, by the Goddess of Industrialization whose handiwork he had already observed in a grim milltown. (359–60)

It is as though Stevens' poem unpacked this 1961 quotation twenty-six years earlier. Stevens' "Mesdames/damsels" trope evolved from utopic to apocalyptic thought, just as Burnshaw's "private angels" informed him of doubts that could not be managed by his politics. Burnshaw's third-person bio-history establishes the particular relevance of Stevens' poem to its time. Burnshaw discloses the romantic idealism that Stevens argued was intrinsic to leftism:

Like Stevens, he had been deeply involved with the Symbolist poets by night and with a business job by day; but unlike Stevens, he quit a remunerative career for the hope of teaching. When his first book appeared, he was writing a thesis on the relationship between poetry and mysticism, at Cornell University, where he had gone to study with F. C. Prescott, author of *Poetry and Myth* and *The Poetic Mind*. Armed with a graduate degree but unable to find a teaching job, he returned to New York (1933) with the notion of living by his pen. Apathy greeted him everywhere except in the office of an impoverished journal, which accepted some of his "proletarian" verse and offered him books for review. (357)

Burnshaw's mystical romantic leanings and their continuity in leftism are engaged in Stevens' "Mesdames" trope. Burnshaw's "misgivings about the glory of the life-to-come in the stateless utopia . . . ushered in, of course, by the Goddess of Industrialization" are prophetically allegorized in Stevens' section VII, where "the statue falls" and the poem ends in "brightest fire." This section was cut, remember. The end of this section projects automatic apocalypse, yet its images do not specifically suggest the industrial ravages of communism. Either Stevens' fire was (coincidentally?) echoed by Burnshaw, or Stevens knew more about Burnshaw than their loose ties imply. Most likely, Stevens' satiric prophesy for social utopia deduced accurate apocalyptic conclusions.

Whatever the case, it seems Stevens feared both his prophesy and the rhetorical rigor of his dialectical critique. On the surface, section IV's critique of socialist romanticism and VII's toppled statue and explosive finale appear to be part of a developing destructive poetics. What they actually propose is both the inherent destructiveness of the romanticism that Stevens wants to trash, save for its "portentous lustres," and the po-

tential violence of a socialism exercised by a “harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music” (*CP* 122). Historically, Mussolini was in power and Hitler was on his way. Many of the cut lines prophesy the future, and thus Stevens’ following explanation seems inadequate if not untrue: “The poem has been cut a little for the purpose of making it clearer” (*L* 322). Actually he watered-down a polemic that clearly argued that socialism is a potentially destructive new romanticism, especially when it functions monumentally, like the stat(u)e it aims to destroy.

Readers of “Owl’s Clover” may still think that its polemics vitiate the poetry. This will be the case if the reader holds to either of the traditional binary sets of ideals that the poem deconstructs. On the one side rests aesthetic purity, creativity, tropism; the taxonomic opposite includes political dogmatism, argument, literalism. These dichotomies are accompanied (but not aligned neatly) with elite versus oppressed, seducers versus seduced, traditionalists versus radicals, stale romantics (classicists) versus utopian romantics (socialists), and on and on. Part of the poem’s argument presents many of these polar forces as dependent upon each other, as co-parasites that will consume or cancel each other out. That view is not as important in my opinion as the poem’s rhetorical suggestion that a monumental art, such as the Statue, oppresses those neglected from the enforced vision, such as the Old Woman. This imbalance demands a polemic to unsettle state complacency. Conversely, polemicists, such as Burnshaw, depend upon the art of rhetoric. When argumentative purists neglect or dismiss poetic seductions, they deny the very rhetorical appeals and tropes that they use for persuasion. Poetry ruins polemics only when polemicists wear fanatical guises that define justice through blindness. Polemics ruins poetry only if the latter is being cherished as a trinket in a glass case from which others are barred. The 1930s demanded a “harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music.” History shows that the wrong ones—Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler—were chosen.

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Notes

¹“Mr. Burnshaw” will be used throughout the essay to refer to the poem’s character, whereas “Burnshaw” will refer to Stanley Burnshaw, the man.

²Robert Emmett Monroe made this point in his essay, “Figuration and Society in ‘Owl’s Clover.’” Monroe calls Stevens’ use of figures “variously interpretable figurable emblems” (136). Furthermore, Monroe argues that in “Owl’s Clover” there is not “an abandonment of historical reference, but, precisely, . . . a re-figuration of it” (127).

³In “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” de Man states: “Accounting for the ‘rhetoricity’ of its own mode, the text also postulates the necessity of its own misreading. . . . The rhetorical character of literary language opens up the possibility of the archetypal error: the recurrent confusion of sign and substance” (135).

⁴See *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems*. The relationship between Marxism (with Burnshaw as example) and apocalypse in this poem invites the question, which Eleanor Cook asked me, whether Marxism itself has an apocalyptic strain. I think the updraft of the poem suggests that Marxism is apocalyptic, and paradigmatically this is so because the proletariat must overthrow the upper class to rise from the ashes. Stevens remarks on this revolutionary recycling in a 1935 letter to Ronald Lane Latimer: "Marxism may or may not destroy the existing sentiment of the marvellous; if it does, it will create another" (L 292).

⁵Although Baker identified consistencies between *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*, which would likely disturb Stevens owing to his poetry's efforts at change in the 1930s, Stevens was enthusiastic about Baker's analysis because of his psychological insights: "No one before has ever come as close to me as Mr. Baker does in that article" (L 292).

⁶Reprinted in Burnshaw's humorously objective account of the events entitled "Wallace Stevens and the Statue."

⁷See Stevens' letters to Hi Simons (L 366–75) in which Stevens patiently answers Simons' numerous questions about the identities of characters in "Owl's Clover." Simons responds to the fluidity of the poem, as does Filreis in *Modernism from Right to Left*, by attempting to pin down character identities in history.

⁸Although Stevens includes the Marxist call for revolution in the apocalyptic updraft, such a threat bothers Stevens less than, as Harvey Teres states, "the most egregious flaw of Marxist orthodoxy: its historic indifference to the problems of human subjectivity and culture, the result of a long-standing and not unproductive emphasis on objective social structures" (156).

⁹See Terry Cooney's *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals* or Judy Kutulas's *The Long War* for detailed accounts of politics in the 1930s, as they take shape in literary journals of the Northeastern States.

¹⁰When speaking of Constative language, Austin makes a point about language's figural capacity that is similar to Paul de Man's "rhetoricity": "many traditional philosophical perplexities have arisen through a mistake—the mistake of taking as straightforward statements of fact utterances which are *either* (in interesting non-grammatical ways) nonsensical *or else* intended as something quite different" (3). Conversely, Austin uses the example, "I do take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife" for Performative language, as defined here: "The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incidence in the performance of the act . . . , the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the *sole* thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed" (8).

¹¹Litz's Appendix C to *Introspective Voyager* details edits made to the Alcestis Press edition of "Owl's Clover."

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The World After Poetry: Revelation in Late Stevens

JAMES LONGENBACH

WALLACE STEVENS CAUTIONED in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" that one ought to resist each "past apocalypse" (CP 257). Because we associate apocalypse with the prophecy of a future event, this phrase might seem oxymoronic. In fact, the phrase is redundant. Synonymous with "revelation," the word "apocalypse" is derived from the Greek *apokalypsis*, an uncovering or laying bare. "John's revelation is a *remembered* experience" (38) emphasizes the novelist Joanna Scott in an essay about the Book of Revelation: to speak of apocalypse is to speak of something that has already been uncovered, something that has happened. John experiences the apocalypse in a single moment of vision, and it takes him months to record this past experience. Under the shadow of the erupting Vesuvius, the young man of Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal" can "describe / The terror of the sound because the sound / Was ancient" (CP 314). It had been heard before.

Throughout his career, Stevens was scrupulously aware that he was writing after—after apocalypse, after the end, after poetry itself. But far from considering his condition of belatedness a burden, Stevens cultivated it. To come after, to convert the end into a beginning, was for Stevens the source of all aesthetic and moral authority. "I very much like the idea of something ahead" (L 333), Stevens once remarked, but since the future is for Stevens never exactly unknown, looking forward is a species of looking back. Speaking of what he called "the revelation of reality" (NA 264) in the late essay "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens declared "[t]o see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences" (OP 260). But if Stevens craved a new knowledge of reality, he was ambivalent about revelation: the annihilation of the gods "left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness" (OP 260). This sentence registers a feeling of deprivation but at the same time domesticates that feeling: the world after the apocalypse is pulled into a tiny room; grownups are children again; the future is the past. "What a ghastly situation it would be," Stevens said in "Three Academic Pieces," "if the world of the dead

was actually different from the world of the living and, if as life ends, instead of passing to a former Victorian sphere, we passed into a land in which none of our problems had been solved, after all, and nothing resembled anything we have ever known" (NA 76–77).

This domestication of the sublime visions of revelation might seem to be born of fear; I suspect that partly it is. But it is more properly the result of Stevens' awareness of the hermeneutics of revelation. "We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future," remarks Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*: "it is rather always already past" (1). The work of much of Stevens' later poetry is to keep the disaster in the past, to recognize that apocalypse is an unveiling of what we already know. "Esthétique du Mal" and "The Auroras of Autumn" could not read more differently; the former poem unfolds at a leisurely, meditative pace while the latter presents ten compressed and emblematic tableaux. But each poem begins with an ominous image of the natural world (a groaning volcano, the aurora borealis), and each poem offers metaphors that make the opening image seem more and more threatening. In "The Auroras of Autumn" the "scholar of one candle" watches this "theatre floating through the clouds" and "feels afraid" (CP 416–17). In contrast, the young man of "Esthétique du Mal" finds it "pleasant to be sitting" beneath the volcano; he reads a book about the sublime, finding time-honored metaphors for his apparently impending doom—making "sure of the most correct catastrophe" (CP 313–14).

Stevens indulges in no idealism about the fate of human history in these poems; he is adamant in "Esthétique" that "Life is a bitter aspic. We are not / At the centre of a diamond" (CP 322). Still, he suggests in both poems that no matter how ominous the natural world appears, it is not necessarily an image of future catastrophe unless our metaphors—derived from earlier disasters—make them seem catastrophic. In "Esthétique" the young man must put down his book and observe the world in different terms: he "establishes / The visible" and (like the Old Testament creator) "calls it good" (CP 324). In "The Auroras" the scholar must see that the very changeableness of the auroras (their suspectibility to a variety of ominous metaphors) suggests that the uncannily lit sky is not an inevitable sign of doom: the image can "move to find / What must unmake" itself (CP 418), and the maker of metaphors can learn to become similarly self-critical, unmaking his own apocalyptic designs. If it is possible that the auroras are not "a spell of light, / A saying out of a cloud," it is also possible that they are "An innocence of the earth and no false sign / Or symbol of malice" (CP 418). Stevens wants to suggest that a vision of our ultimate demise may be as consoling as a vision of our infancy: positing the end of the world, we are relieved of responsibility for it. "The greatest poverty," says Stevens in the final section of "Esthétique du Mal," is " . . . to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair" (CP 325).

It is nonetheless fair, I think, to suggest that Stevens so strategically undermines the grounds of despair in order to be allowed to feel it; re-reading "The Auroras of Autumn" we are continuously surprised by the eighth canto's anomalous vision of the innocent child—we need to feel the poem's true horror in order to feel its tenuous consolation, its transformation of a future threat into a domesticated past. Harold Bloom has spoken of a similar "recoil from oblivion" (290) in the final lines of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," and part of the effect of these thrilling lines, careening over the break between the final cantos, lies in their unexpected turn from the uncanny mother of the dead to what Stevens called in "Three Academic Pieces" a "former Victorian sphere"—from the silence following the "last word" to the fullness of new speech.

O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve
And motion outward, reddened and resolved
From sight, in the silence that follows her last word—

VI

This is the mythology of modern death
And these, in their mufflings, monsters of elegy,
Of their own marvel made, of pity made,

Compounded and compounded, life by life,
These are death's own supremest images,
The pure perfections of parental space,

The children of a desire that is the will,
Even of death, the beings of the mind
In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare . . .

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
The people, those by which it lives and dies. (*CP* 435–36)

Having surveyed the geography of the afterlife, delineating its three presiding figures (sleep, peace, and the mother of the dead), Stevens asserts that the landscape is metaphor: these otherworldly figures are the "children" of human desire, and the human mind is itself "a child that sings itself to sleep." But even if all ends are converted here to beginnings, even as revelation is converted to nostalgia, Stevens nonetheless asserts that the figures in the mythology of modern death are "Of their own marvel made"—they are both metaphors and masters, and we are left with the faintest shadow of oblivion hanging over the child's bed.

Revelation is not completely domesticated in these final lines, but neither is revelation uncompromised throughout the earlier cantos of the poem. "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" begins by introducing the three figures of the afterlife; the second canto then introduces a man who one day

“walked living” (CP 432) through this landscape of the dead; and the subsequent three cantos present his visions of sleep, peace, and the mother. But if these three revelations are in some sense an apocalyptic uncovering of the world beyond human experience, the visions remain in another sense covered. The figure of peace sparkles in a cloth woven by “Generations of the imagination”; if it is “an alphabet / By which to spell out holy doom and end,” it is an alphabet we have made—“a robe that is our glory” (CP 434–35). Similarly, the figure of sleep is inseparable from the robe he wears: its surface “wraps round / The giant body the meanings of its folds, / The weaving and the crinkling and the vex, / As on water of an afternoon in the wind / After the wind has passed” (CP 433). These metaphors of wrapping, weaving, and folding do not simply imply that the figures of peace and sleep are covered, that their robes conceal an interior yet to be revealed. As Gilles Deleuze suggests in *The Fold*, his meditation on Leibniz, an interior space is not beneath the surface but is made by the convolution, the folding, of the surface into pockets and caves of apparently unknown dimension. As Stevens suggests, meaning exists not inside the figure but within the folds of his garment, in the waves on the surface of the water. Even when the mother of death is said to move “beyond artifice,” to stand “on the edges of oblivion” (CP 435), the very texture of the poetry embodies the recoil from oblivion that the final canto of the poem enacts thematically. “It has a fine inner lining,” says Jorie Graham in “Le Manteau de Pascal” (a poem heavily influenced by Deleuze), “but it is / as an exterior that you see it” (64).

Stevens plays in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” with the word “eucalyptus” (meaning “well covered,” in contrast to *apokalypsis*, the extraordinary uncovering of things), as Eleanor Cook suggests (see 267–94). “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” might be called a eucalyptic poem but not an antiapocalyptic poem. It does not simply recoil from oblivion, domesticating apocalypse, but refigures the space of oblivion: the other world exists not beyond or beneath but within the folds of the world we already know. “Description is revelation” (CP 344), Stevens asserts in “Description without Place,” but he resists the association of revelation with ultimacy, going so far as to say in “The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract” that “If the day writhes, it is not with revelations. / One goes on asking questions” (CP 429). New heaven and new earth are consequently to be found at home—in the commonplace, the credible: in the twenty-ninth canto of “An Ordinary Evening” the mariners discover that the extraordinary world of the lemon trees is nothing but the ordinary world of the elm trees “‘folded over, turned round’ ” (CP 487).

In comparison even to “An Ordinary Evening” or “The Auroras of Autumn,” “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is a difficult, often opaque poem. It also seems to me one of Stevens’ most emotionally available poems. It speaks both to the acute desire for revelation and the equally acute need (as Stevens emphasizes in “The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract”) to go on ques-

tioning. More profoundly, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" suggests that the hermeneutics of revelation and of questioning are finally indistinguishable. At the same time, part of the poem's emotional power is due to the sense that, like "The Auroras of Autumn," it concludes with a giant wish fulfillment. These poems would not be so aesthetically satisfying or morally responsible if they did not allow us to wonder if the domestication of apocalypse might be an evasion.

"The volcano trembled in another ether, / As the body trembles at the end of life," says Stevens in the opening section of "Esthétique du Mal": "It was almost time for lunch" (CP 314), he continues. The lines prefigure Mark Strand's rebuttal of Theodore Adorno's declaration about the fate of lyric poetry after Auschwitz. Joseph Brodsky told the anecdote in his 1987 Nobel lecture: "'How can one write poetry after Auschwitz?' inquired Adorno . . . 'And how can one eat lunch?' the American poet Mark Strand once retorted. In any case, the generation to which I belong has proven capable of writing that poetry" (qtd. in Feldman 48). There is a way in which Adorno's declaration preserves the possibility of poetry's grandeur; Strand's remark deflates this pretension. Still, Irving Feldman's "Outrage Is Anointed by Levity, or Two Laureates A-Lunching" (which takes Brodsky's anecdote as its epigraph) reminds us that human suffering is not so easily dismissed.

*In any case, (or, as our comedians say,
"But seriously, folks"), has Adorno's question
been disposed of, interred beneath the poems
written since Auschwitz?—rather than raised again
and again like a ghost by each of them?*

In any case, one would like very much to know
how one *can* eat one's lunch after Auschwitz.
Can you tell me that, please? (48)

After a long, tendentiously funny catalogue of answers to this question ("First of all, HEARTILY and CHUCKLINGLY, as an example of good health, infectious optimism, faith in humanity"), Feldman concludes that "all we shall know of apocalypse / is not the shattering that follows but / brittleness before, the high mindlessness, the quips" (49).

Stevens is never brittle. And the humor of Strand's quip is functional. But Feldman's sense of the irresponsibility involved in Brodsky's burying of Adorno's question ("*In any case*") is not irrelevant to the poetry of *The Auroras of Autumn*. The effort to "change from destiny to slight caprice" (CP 417), as Stevens puts it in "The Auroras of Autumn," may prevent us from idealizing despair at the price of our ability to acknowledge human suffering. Throughout the later poetry, when Stevens allows himself to say that "It is / As if the central poem became the world" (CP 441)—as if the perfections of metaphor could be substituted for the vicissitudes of

experience—it can seem as if he wants to live in a world without pain. But if Stevens' domestications of apocalypse prefigure Strand on the one hand, they also prefigure Feldman on the other. After the seductive vision of the innocent mother in the eighth canto of "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens turns in the following canto to a vision first of fraternal love ("we fed on being brothers") and then of heterosexual bliss ("her coming became a freedom of the two, / An isolation which only the two could share" [CP 419]). But in a moment of disjunction nearly as thrilling as the moment of extension at the end of the penultimate canto of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," Stevens asks two unexpected questions.

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?
Of what disaster is this the imminence:
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt?

The stars are putting on their glittering belts.
They throw around their shoulders cloaks that flash
Like a great shadow's last embellishment.

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,
Almost as part of innocence, almost,
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part. (CP 419–20)

In these most acutely apocalyptic lines of "Auroras" Stevens goes on questioning: if disaster may come tomorrow as a part of innocence, it may also come as part of poetry itself—the most necessary part, the tenderest part. I have emphasized the real power of Stevens' domestication of oblivion, but Stevens is ultimately not content to trust that power: the act of domestication must be questioned; it cannot be sustained.

"After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things," says Stevens in the late poem of that title. "It is as if / We had come to an end of the imagination" (CP 502). Stevens knows that the end is not truly in sight, but he needs to act as if it were, just as he needs in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" to posit a fresh beginning—a domestic space of innocence. It is tempting to see the bleak little poems of *The Rock* as Stevens' comment on the grand aspirations of the longer poems of *The Auroras of Autumn*; a "great structure has become a minor house," he says in "The Plain Sense of Things," a "fantastic effort has failed" (CP 502). But this temptation cannot prevent us from seeing that the longer poems also subject themselves to this critique.

"The Owl in the Sarcophagus" seems to me the most beautiful and compelling of these poems. Like "The Auroras of Autumn," it teeters between innocence and oblivion, between the covering of metaphor and the uncovering of revelation; it also shows how the threat of oblivion can too easily become a lure. But the poem also embodies in the very folds of its language the idea that innocence and oblivion—the covered and the un-

covered, the question and the revelation, the before and the after—are difficult to separate.

“It is and it / Is not and, therefore, is” (CP 440), says Stevens in “A Primitive Like an Orb”: this is precisely the language of Revelation. “The beast that thou sawest was, and is not, and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit and go into perdition” (Rev. 17:7), says the angel to John on the island of Patmos. The Book of Revelation trades on paradox; it revels in metaphor. If, like so many latter-day progenitors of apocalyptic rhetoric, we remember only the visions—the beast with seven heads and ten horns—we forget the paradoxes at our own risk. “For John,” says Joanna Scott, “sitting alone on his island beneath a brilliant blue sky, breathing in the fragrance of a nearby eucalyptus, his fierce faith was momentarily rewarded with aural and visual correlatives” (39). For the rest of us, the lucky ones, the ones who come after revelation, after Stevens, there is no such confirmation, only the fluctuant, self-canceling language of poetry.

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Afterword: Last Words on Stevens and Apocalypse

LANGDON HAMMER

IF STEVENS WAS INDEED the non- or antiapocalyptic poet these essays, with one or two exceptions, find him to be, why was he, as they also demonstrate, so profoundly (and, over the course of his career, so long) occupied with apocalyptic modes of language and thought? Eleanor Cook, in a discussion of Stevens and apocalypse that has directly influenced several of the essays here, observes, "as the ontological force of the old language of revelation is vanishing, we are more than ever fascinated by how that language works" (272). Cook was referring, in 1988, to the aims and practices of current literary criticism: "Though revelation may be one of *the* logocentric notions par excellence (to quote Barbara Johnson on Derrida), critics of very different persuasions still desire the language of revelation, either general (we unveil or unfold what is implicit in the text) or particular (we variously revise the word 'revelation')" (272). Cook's comments apply, in 1999, to the critics in this special issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, who are fascinated by apocalypse without believing in it. They apply to Stevens too. It may be that Stevens, like ourselves, returns to apocalypse in order to apprehend its vanishing "ontological force" and to test his freedom from its promises and threats.

It may also be, as Malcolm Woodland suggests in his essay on "Puella Parvulla," that Stevens' antiapocalyptic stance simply "proves difficult to distinguish from an apocalyptic one." Although Woodland does not say this, we could make the same point about Stevens' late poetry generally, where "the plain sense of things" (in the poem of that title, for instance) signifies both an apocalyptic "end of the imagination" (*CP* 502) and a willful refusal to posit a transcendental level of meaning to be uncovered, a beyond. For Woodland, the confusion between these two stances in Stevens looks ahead to the postmodern condition, defined as a certain impasse: the break with apocalyptic thinking in postmodernism remains a mode of apocalypse, Woodland argues, "in its very desire to transcend history." If "Puella Parvulla" circumvents that impasse, it is only by presenting a "new fiction of the liminal, of the transition between fictions, a paradoxical trope for the space between old tropes and new." This account of the poem reveals it as an example of the "fluctuant, self-canceling language of poetry"

James Longenbach describes in the last essay in this volume. By linking Stevens to contemporary poetry, and showing us how his ambivalent attitude toward apocalypse anticipates differing responses to Adorno's statement about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, Longenbach too evokes a postmodern Stevens.

It is not that, according to Longenbach, there is nothing to be uncovered in Stevens, but that poetic depth is continuous with poetic surface. Longenbach makes the point by reference to Gilles Deleuze's commentary on Leibniz in *The Fold*: "an interior space is not beneath the surface but is made by the convolution, the folding, of the surface into pockets and caves of apparently unknown dimension." This gives us a way to think about the recurrent image of folded garments in Stevens—for example, those that clothe the figure of sleep in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." The folded surface of Stevens' poetry, which those garments figure and which he calls "The weaving and the crinkling and the vex" (CP 433), is always made of language, as several critics here remind us, including Jennifer Bates in her explication of Stevens' paradigmatic apocalyptic poem, "Of Mere Being." In that title phrase, Bates explains, Stevens is "not appealing to something beyond words, but rather to that in words that orients us properly to being."

Notice that, while Bates emphasizes the priority of linguistic mediation in Stevens' poem, she also emphasizes the referential function of that language: something in it "orients us" to something outside it, what Stevens calls "being." Metaphor carries us over "the gap between being and language," Bates writes, but it does not make that gap go away. Poetry emerges from the sustained *disjunction* of those terms, the maintenance of their difference. It is a simple point, but a key one (reiterated in various ways throughout these essays), because Stevens' resistance to apocalypse is always a resistance to the collapsing of being and language, the two parts of the sign, signified and signifier. It would be incorrect therefore to say that being is ever fully folded into language in Stevens (which would make him a poet more like John Ashbery than he is). He never was in danger of collapsing the two terms in the opposite direction. This is, as Stevens understood their position, what leftist critics in the 1930s, such as Stanley Burnshaw, would have had him to do. As Angus Cleghorn describes it in his essay on "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," Stevens staunchly refused "the demand for an aesthetic of automatic fixed identity, for mimetic realism." The statue in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" is apocalyptic (the poem was later retitled "The Statue at the World's End") because its monumental form embodies a fantasy of escape from the difference between language and being that is fundamental to temporal experience. Cleghorn calls that fantasy "the utopic desire for self-expression, unitary identity, and determinate Truth" epitomized by the motto carved on the monument, "*To Be Itself*."

Against an art that would be, in Cleghorn's phrase, "just definition," Stevens opposed his own demand for "A definition with an illustration, not / Too exactly labelled" (CP 443). This is what Stevens calls the giant who appears garbed in "the serious folds of majesty" in "A Primitive Like an Orb," "an abstraction given head," a human form that is at once wholly imagined and fully sensuous, larger than life—a "giant" (CP 442–43)—because it is the product of a kind of generalization (an inexact labeling) that allows the giant to stand for many individual lives. Bates speaks of the apocalyptic moment in "Of Mere Being" as a return to "sense-certainty" comparable with the concluding movement of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. Stevens is always in pursuit of that end, not only when he comes to "The palm at the end of the mind" (OP 141). It is what he refers to as "an abstraction given head," indeed "given arms" and the rest of a human body—so as to be able to grasp and feel the world. Embodiment of this kind is the return to being in and through language ("Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines" [CP 424]) sought by the revenants in another of Stevens' late poems, "Large Red Man Reading." In the "thin," "spended hearts" of the disembodied spirits who come to listen to him, the words the red man chanted "Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are / And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked" (CP 424). It is a powerful image of the end of poetry, in both senses, for Stevens.

Carolyn Masel calls such recoveries of feeling "the return of the figural" in Stevens, meaning a return of the human figure after an apocalyptic loss of representation. This pattern, which Masel traces in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "conforms strikingly to the pattern of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the latter being combined, invariably, with the language of revelation." As she makes clear, this imagery involves Stevens in "a reworking of the concept of representativeness, whereby Christ's emblematic status is replaced by a democratically conceived substitute," of which the giant in "A Primitive Like an Orb" is one example and "Large Red Man Reading" another. These Stevensian men—sublime, audacious figures—are representatives of earth and earthliness rather than any transcendental order. But their Christological dimension, which Masel rightly points out, brings apocalypse to mind again, all the same. Stevens would not be disturbed by this, who knew there can be no end to the discourse of the end.

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Poems

Sanctuary, Elizabeth Park

Visitors search my park like a memory,
Ransacking my old bushes like tropes,
Exegetes of any idea, annoying ferns,
Fluttering ducks from the complacent pond,
Searching for a sign, a tablet of adagia
Growing marmoreally wise among stunt cedars,
Never suspecting a vigilant toad, belly
Puffing beneath his nubby drapery,
Fixing hatpin eyes on blinks and whines,
Tightening his mind's trap, waiting
For slant purple light to dissolve enthusiasts,
Holding his secret, triggered tongue.

William F. Dougherty
West Hartford, Conn.

If Mr. Wallace Stevens Instead of Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning Had Written Sonnet #43 from the Portuguese[†]

How do I count thee? Let me love the ways:
One, that noble, mobile blackbird eye.
Two, the tree, three-minded, blackbirds high.
Three, the wind, against which blackbird stays.
Four, the three-in-one that seeks to praise
by *Five*, the tuneful innuendo—sly—
of blackbird song; and *Six*, the shadow cry
of bird and image joined (the shattered phrase
of cause). Now, *Seven*, O the golden birds
and women's feet! *Eight*, the lucid sound,
the rhythm. *Nine*, the wild, enchanted words
of circles. *Ten*, green bawds. *Eleven*, ground
with blackbirds haunted. *Twelve*, the river's surge
toward *Thirteen*, evening, snow, and death's black round.

Robert C. Jones
Warrensburg, Mo.

[†]First published in *English Journal* 80.8 (October 1991): 103.

The Metaphysician's Insomnia

The wind kicks up surf and keeps him awake,
Whistling its plaint against the nailed-shut frame.
The ocean, in its phases, swells and shrinks.

He tries to remember the words to songs,
Building outward from their refrains. He counts
Backwards from four hundred and sixty-eight,

But gives up, at last, before zero or sleep.
Daylight dismantles a scaffold of fogs,
Censors the seductive postures of stars.

He cannot bridge the threshold between sheer
Exhaustion and the dead-man's-float of dreams.
The ache of his aching body is so real

He understands, at last, what ecstasy means.
As always, a hairline crack separates
The noumenal from the phenomenal,

Sleep from waking, the poem from the fragment,
And yet it seems to him an ice-cut gorge,
A comet's wake, a fissure between meaning's

Irresolution and desire's closure.
He starts to recite "Stars at Tallapoosa,"
The meter allowing for plausible errors,

But the poem's final line vanishes like sugar
On his tongue: at first sweet, then a burn,
Then the bad aftertaste of a long night.

Eric Pankey
Fairfax, Va.

Poem with Words from Essays on Stevens

One trope is especial, he said,
as the drinks were served at dusk:
a figure from the fire of your own mind.

(See how it works? But that extemporaneous
start, being so, must be smithied into something
shining like an empress' chair or onion dome.)

Excogitate it thus, and you'll see
what the hierophant, robed in holy smoke,
can only guess from her sea-salt hands.

Certainly, you'll have to ride elevators
and keep purple plumes and burnished cats
from the girl who types the forms.

But home again, when a twilight
like this one razes that undulating line
we call hill and pine, you can make her

a sibylline intelligence if you choose.
Have her fly from a niche
or mean a multiplicity

by simply brushing her hair.
Or let her resist meaning as she will,
burning a letter, climbing a stair.

Stuart Bloodworth
Tullahoma, Tenn.

That Men Sleep

There is the humdrum of the afternoon sun,
the bleached-burnt sun that is not the moon.
Men tend to believe this; it is how they conceive this.

The man in the tall arch becomes a beacon and bell.
Now, there is nothing new that cannot be made—
though the air is burning with unfulfilled desire.

Has sleep cast this spell? The blinking mind blank?
The cool breeze blows through the shutters.
He may flinch and toss but he remains asleep.

Garett Geake
Akron, N.Y.

American Supined

*I certainly do not exist from nine to six,
when I am in the office.*

—Stevens letter to Elsie Moll

I've wondered Mr. Sublime,
Mr. Guitar, how you dealt
With those Hartford mockers,
Those mickey mockers
In plated pairs
From nine till six?
Did you exist? And where
Did your angels—your devils—
Where did they go?
Did you feel like General Jackson
Stuck in pose? Mr. Sublime,
What does one do with his mind
From nine till six?
When the spirit is restrained
Does it exist?

Garett Geake
Akron, N.Y.

To Wallace Stevens, Flying High

Snowy New England lies below, inscribed
By ragged lakes and rivers. It is a land
To set the psalmist thinking of his bones.
The granite teeth have jutted through the skin.
From whiskered woods, the ice-rimmed ponds
Stare up like aged eyes. It takes a dogmatist,
—A Puritan, though feathered like an Aztec—
To find a likeness to the mind
Amidst this litter of eons:
To tell the furtive circumstances
Of rabbits in warm mud, of fruits, of ghosts,
Of villagers who crawl amidst it all
Beating their arms to the music of their blood.

Paul Hamill
Ithaca, N.Y.

Purple

Cézanne's purple descends like snow;
it falls into the mouth of the evening
that embraces it, it falls into the room
where orange is waiting on white cloth,
it falls into the zone where we gather to inspect it.
This is something you never counted on,
this purple: the unseen grackles on the hillside
dissolve into it, the green lady with
her ruinous daughter recedes.
It happens again, as it always does.
An eye is anointed by another eye.
Everything in the world is touched by it,
finds its swirling shadow, and turns away.

Stan Sanvel Rubin
Brockport, N.Y.

B & I Line

So I crossed the Irish Sea
Heading to Dublin one green night,
And I eventually abandoned
My ten-shilling berth
Next to the riveted, yellow-enameled wall
To the engine room; I climbed up
To the deck, stepping over porter vomit
And children, and I met a young Oxford grad
My age (was this memory—dream?—1967 or '68?)
Whom I talked to by the rail for hours,
Who heard I wanted to write prose fiction
And with clipped diction gave me
The only real lesson in critical theory
That has ever mattered, a lifetime plan—
“Georgian or experimental, old man?”

Peter LaSalle
Austin, Tx.

Riverfront Bar

1

Like a man sitting beside an ocean,
watching the waves, he plays

his steel guitar, looking out the window.
More people come in, their eyes unstable.

A couple moves to a darker table.
The room is sparse and smells of cigarettes.

The dim light turns our faces gray.
His playing is a river, swelling

with its strength, carrying
what has been thrown away.

On a TV muted reruns play.
Or again, his hands are waves,

his fingers gulls, climbing
and diving in broad designs.

A waitress chalks tomorrow's signs.

2

The dim light becomes a guitar.

He picks along a world of steel
and brick that makes a melody

of blood and skin, a body
of salt and stone,

the jagged lyrics, forgotten tune
playing across the shadow and light

of which his voice is made,
and his fingering of the dim light.

3

Recorded music plays.
Smoking, he comes to the table.

He says, "I thought you moved away."
My friend answers, "I want to learn

the last song you played," and he swigs
his beer and will not stop talking.

The ceiling fan throws shadows toward the walls.
We turn toward the stage

when Tom takes up his guitar again
and sets his cigarette aside.

He plays a tremor in the air,
the tune returning in steel changes.

Another couple gets up to leave.
Outside, the traffic lights are changing.

The music goes on without reprieve.
A man at the bar nods and stares

like this could be his playing.

Jerry Harp
Iowa City, Iowa

Refrain in a Bad Time

Nuance of a theme by Wallace Stevens

If everything's pure mimicry then—what?
The murmurous rising is scattered and of a piece.

The metronomic musings of one mind
moan behind every start and turn.

As the chancre on the tree-bole has no chance
to rise or fall on anything but tree,

the audience has never any mind
but what engages, what is told to it

in language it can understand—a scarf,
fluttering slightly, purple as the robe

about to fall to the gloved touch of a stranger,
a hero, a man masked in mind, in scarlet

tights, in accents steady as the rain
is steady any instant—and in that instant

understands that what it has is there,
transformed, on the gaudy lip of stage,

about to break, to reveal just what to think,
to wash you in what you know and never say:

the kiss begins to flutter her forehead,
flushed silent through the tension of disguise,

the nadir separating him from her
as if water from sky, an ineffable horizon,

about the show you what you want to show,
and recedes

after a decorous moment, and the act ends,
and the ringing chancre of applause begins.

Stuart Greenhouse
South Deerfield, Mass.

Reviews

Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute.

By Beverly Maeder. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Once upon a conference, a fellow panelist asked me if my attention to the non-thematic, non-philosophical aspects of Stevens' poems was not a way to trivialize his achievement. The question partook of the prejudice, encouraged by the advent of "theory," that only ideas are important, whereas formal elements hang on poetry as ornaments do on a Christmas tree. The various theoretical treatments the eighties and early nineties critics gave Stevens were useful, as they moved away from New Critical concentration on the poems as autonomous works and revealed the importance of contexts. But these approaches underplayed the aesthetic aspect to the point where we may have forgotten it altogether.

This relative absence of concern with aesthetics in the recent criticism permits Beverly Maeder to define the purpose of her book, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*, in relation to the "neglected" aspects of Stevens' poetry. "Neglect" may overstate the situation. The focus on language and its aesthetics has been gaining ground lately with studies such as Jacqueline Brogan's *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language* and Eleanor Cook's *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, and my own *Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens*. These language-oriented studies scrutinize the poems in their materiality without falling into the New Critical trap and separating the "work" from its historical and cultural context. The appearance of Maeder's book allows us to see a new trend forming that would be aesthetic and linguistic without being ahistorical. It would also have benefitted from the lessons of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and cultural criticism without sacrificing the distinction of aesthetics. The impact of this book may decide whether we should salute this new trend or turn away from it. For showing us the depth to which one must go in order to understand the surface of language, the book itself deserves a salute.

Perhaps because the author perceived neglect, the book has the ambitious design of covering all aspects of Stevens' language: rhetoric, syntax, contextual semantics, and sound. Rhetoric gets two chapters, both dealing with metaphor. Chapter 1 deals with metaphor as resemblance and shows how Stevens debunks "old resemblances" even as he uses them to make his own statements. Stevens' intention when debunking set analogies is not simply to mock an unimaginative use of language but to overcome its restrictions. There is good reason to want the restrictions out of the way. Because language offers us set metaphors, we have no choice but to see the world in the same old way. Thus language itself leads us to metaphysics, impossible to bypass as long as descriptions remain the same. Since he cannot escape the bonds of language, the poet plays with it in ways that show its inadequacies. By foregrounding his awareness of the impossibility to escape language, Maeder makes us see Stevens as a deconstructionist *avant-la-lettre*.

The idea that Stevens' use of metaphors is an escape or evasion from the normative constraints of language gets a fuller treatment in the second chapter, which deals with metaphor as transfer. Stevens creates a word-world that ultimately supersedes the world it is supposed to represent in language. In this respect Stevens' purpose seems to go further than deconstruction in asserting the primacy of language over the experienced world.

Maeder's most original contribution to Stevens criticism resides in chapter 3, where she discusses his use of syntax. She uses Derrida's discussion of the verb "to be" as copula and the differences between Indo-European and Chinese languages in order to show how the philosophical sense of Stevens' poems depends on the use of grammar. "Apostrophe for Vincentine" seems quite appropriate to show such effects of syntax, since critics, probably because its seeming playfulness and lack of philosophical grounding, have long avoided the poem. In Maeder's analysis, the poem becomes a battleground between traditional metaphysics and a Heideggerian view of being. Like the poem itself, Vincentine is virtually created in language by Stevens' manipulation of syntax.

Obviously, Wallace Stevens is not unique in realizing what syntax can do to a poem and how its disruptions can raise questions about the function of language. However, his use of syntactic variations is related to his larger aesthetic purpose. Maeder's comparison of Stevens to Mallarmé is instructive: "His poetry is even the polar opposite of that of as radical a poet as Mallarmé, who disarticulates grammatical functions rather than making them more dense, and who gradually eliminates the signifiers of being rather than foregrounding them" (107). Unlike Mallarmé, who moves toward the inarticulate, Stevens overloads the signifying mechanisms of language to the point where the sign can be emptied of content. Thus emptied, it can play a role in forming a pattern.

If Maeder's approach to Stevens looks like deconstruction, one should not imagine it to be in the same vein as other approaches inspired by that trend. Maeder is not looking in Stevens' poems for ideas similar to those of Derrida, but shows us how Stevens himself operates on the surface of language the same kind of unsettling demystifications to which deconstruction has accustomed us.

Chapter 5 resumes the discussion about the function of representation normally attributed to language by addressing the anecdotal. Maeder uses Filreis' historical insights about "The Man with the Blue Guitar" to show how the linguistic texture of the poem relates to the historical context in which the poem was produced. Stevens' nonrepresentational, nonreferential use of language enables him to extend the critique of totalitarianism from fascism and communism to American democracy. This chapter best demonstrates how a formal analysis extends into a historical and cultural domain. Form is the result of a cultural development, and its analysis unfolds the whole cultural and historical context where it develops.

In chapter 6, Maeder deals with the sound aspect of Stevens' poetry. The sound of verse performs the same function as syntax and rhetoric do. It distances language from its purely semantic signification and demonstrates how

meaning can be restructured on another plane. Although the approach here is not new, it sets "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in a new and proper light by stressing the performative aspect of this poem. Maeder insists on the self-effacing activity of the poem. Its sound pattern draws our attention to its ongoingness and its impermanence. Finally, the epilogue brings together two late poems that could easily be taken as philosophical and demonstrates the richness of their other meaning, the meaning that lies in their grammar, rhetoric, and sound.

Maeder's analyses of the poems are fastidiously detailed, guiding the less attentive reader to discover meaning where he or she least suspected it. At their best, they are exciting and inspiring, even though at their worst they tend to push the limits of common sense. Her (not many) slips into critical mannerism may warn us that any critical method must be guarded against overuse. If a sound coincidence may awaken a forgotten etymology or a dead metaphor, the event is worth signaling to readers that may have overlooked it. But to want to see a sound coincidence between "chandelier" and "chancellor," for instance, is a stretch that overstates the point and diminishes its credibility.

Such slippages cannot make us overlook Maeder's merits. The book brings together in a synthetic way all the gains of contemporary theory using language as a nodal point. She makes us see how Stevens' poetic language reaches philosophical depth by deploying its glittering surfaces. Maeder's book not only fills in gaps in the existent criticism, but it also opens up new possibilities of research, especially in the domain of syntax. It may, by its approach, inspire more critics to explore the surface of Stevens' poems and make readers realize there is nothing trivial about it.

Anca Rosu

DeVry Institute, North Brunswick, N.J.

Treize façons de regarder Wallace Stevens: Une écriture de la présence.

By Alain Suberchicot. Paris and Montreal: L'Harmattan, 1998.

Alain Suberchicot's study of Stevens presents the kind of monograph that today could not and would not be produced in the United States. This is a question partly of economic market conditions, partly of critical fashion. On the one hand, studies of Suberchicot's kind have already been written in English in such numbers (especially during the first wave of Stevens criticism, in the 1960s) that American publishers would understandably request more novelty from a manuscript in the hope of filling an unexplored niche in the market. On the other hand, critical tastes in American academia have undergone such a sea-change since those sixties that a distinctly old-style study such as Suberchicot's would be deemed anachronistic today and be felt to fall short of contemporary critical demands. No American Ph.D. student would still dare write in as dehistoricized, depoliticized, and idealistic a manner as Suberchicot does from his Transatlantic perch. What is more, no American critic could probably afford to ignore so many of his colleagues' studies that have transformed the understanding of this poet over the past few decades.

Suberchicot, a professor of American literature at the University of Clermont-Ferrand 2 in France and a longstanding champion and connoisseur of poetry in English, has written a piece of criticism strongly tailored to a French audience. *Treize façons de regarder Wallace Stevens* appears as the fourth title in a series whose self-declared aim it is to enrich the knowledge of North America in France. It is the first book in the series that addresses a literary-critical topic, and one can only marvel at the fact that a major French publisher can reasonably expect to find a sufficiently large market for such a highly specialized monograph. For that is what the book really is, despite the banner under which it is produced: a thoroughly literary-theoretical study of a single and difficult foreign poet that makes almost no effort to anchor its subject in its historical and material American environment and that treats poetry in the most traditional manner as an autonomous field whose concerns are entirely intrapoetical, not worldly. This is a book, therefore, that will speak only to those French-speaking intellectuals and university students who want to acquire a deeply felt sense of the complexity and allure of one particular canonical poet, Wallace Stevens, whose reputation has recently been spreading also in France. To those few readers, however, it will probably come as a fascinating and richly rewarding work.

Treize façons de regarder Wallace Stevens, as its title indicates, pursues thirteen different ways of looking at its poetical subject. These thirteen perspectives, themselves again systematically divided into triads (on the analogy of Stevens' own pseudo-dialectical habits, one presumes), are not organized thematically, as one would expect, but chronologically. They are used as stepping-stones in a critical narrative whose principal purpose it is to cover all of Stevens' canonized poetry, from *Harmonium* through *The Rock*. (Juvenilia or posthumously published poems are excluded from the account.) Discussions within the book's thirteen chapters, in other words, never range across the whole oeuvre but are always developed with respect to only a restricted sample of poems that appear in one particular volume. Indeed, Suberchicot's analysis is not only largely ahistorical in its scant attention to the sociopolitical circumstances under which Stevens composed (which are referred to only in the most general shorthand terms like WWI, the Depression, WWII, or Hiroshima); it is also ahistorical in its reading of the texts themselves. No development is traced within the oeuvre; the order of composition or publication of poems is deemed irrelevant and the famous interaction among poems that turns Stevens' work into such a gigantic intertextual network is largely ignored. The unit of analysis is the individual poem, and even then (at times frustratingly) never in its entirety.

What Suberchicot practices is a late variant of the kind of bouquet criticism with which Stevens studies started to flower in the fifties and sixties: he moves from one handful of lines or stanzas to the next, selecting his textual fragments only as they are helpful in elaborating a larger argument—that of reconstructing Stevens' philosophical and poetical "intellectual heritage." His main interest lies with the *theory* of poetry that is embodied and frequently enough thematized and foregrounded by Stevens' metapoetical texts. Although Suberchicot shows himself to be an astute and original close reader,

he seems to be concerned above all with the more abstract and general fate of poetry writing in a modern age. His thirteen ways of looking at Stevens are those of a critic who reads poems through the lenses of literary theory and philosophy. They reflect the preoccupations of someone who wants to ask broader questions on the following order: How does Stevens as a quintessentially modernist poet have access to reality? How does he seize the morphology of a place? How does he manage to make the "other" present in his work? How does his poetry negotiate the gap between speech and writing? How can poetical voice be made to subvert meter? What are the merits of metaphor? What is the role of diglossia or deconstruction in Stevens' poetry? How and why does Stevens produce figures of instability? How may the solipsistic activity of writing be defended in terms of social value? How can a modern poet master the sublime? How does Stevens manage to resist organicist thinking and the drive for making sense?

These and many more questions are presented as if they self-evidently emanated from Stevens' own texts or their intellectual antecedents, but their agenda is of course also determined by this particular critic's theoretical interests. Even if the questions generally manage to stay close to those implicitly raised by the poetry and are for much of the time convincingly referred back to individual texts, they are obviously also shaped by the intellectual frameworks offered by outside theoreticians. Suberchicot works in that most fertile tradition of Stevens criticism that seeks to explain the poet's indirect and playfully recorded ideas and beliefs through other thinkers, whose prose quotes are marshalled as analogies and paraphrases that must help to explain what Stevens so idiosyncratically enacts within his poetical idiom. Instead of drawing on Stevens criticism in the more narrow sense, then, Suberchicot prefers to cross-fertilize his analysis with ideas culled from elsewhere. The major intellectual strands on which he grafts his discussion are those of American pragmatism (with, in addition to Poirier, Rorty, Fish, and Cavell, especially a lot of Emerson and William James), deconstruction (where the references, unusually for Stevens criticism, are almost only to Derrida's more recent work from the 1990s), and Western philosophy at large (from Plato, Kant, Burke, or Hegel, to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Adorno, or Habermas). To these strands should be added a less familiar (hence welcome) line of French critics addressing especially the fate of post-Mallarméan poetry and the much more familiar literary genealogy that connects Stevens to the romantic poets.

The overall view of Stevens' work that thus emerges from Suberchicot's highly theoretical narrative is above all informed by the metaphysical relativism of American pragmatism and by a taste for binarisms, paradoxes, and undecidabilities typical of deconstruction. Characteristically, the main argument developed through these 13 x 3 perspectives itself hinges on a recurrent paradox: that Stevens derived his strength from his weakness. This is a poet, argues Suberchicot, who sought to save the genre of poetry in a modern era and simultaneously to assure himself a canonical place within that genre by endlessly (if often ambivalently) staging a poetical procedure in which vulnerability equals power and failure equals redemption. The first terms of these

equations are in Suberchicot's parlance almost entirely epistemological in nature: as a thoroughly idealistic and philosophically inclined critic, Suberchicot is interested only in the metaphysically and linguistically skeptical Stevens who sees through the essential shortcomings of language and representation, not in the subjective psychology of a disaffected and disillusioned author or in that author's concrete social status. At the same time, however, Suberchicot repeatedly insists on Stevens as a writer with a doggedly humanist sense of literary responsibility, a man who was out to transform metaphysical and linguistic skepticism into a cultural asset to the small community of poetry lovers. Unsurprisingly, then, Richard Rorty's triangle of contingency, irony, and solidarity is enlisted to explicate Stevens' poetical project as well.

There is a paradoxical homogeneity to Suberchicot's narrative about a poet's consistent antihomogeneity. Stevens is presented so entirely as a sobered-up, ironical debunker of metaphysical nostalgias that there appears to be little place left for the poet who was at times also strongly attracted to notions of a center or of a major man or hero, and who could grow tired of his own doctrine of elusiveness by expressing a strong desire to arrive, if ever so provisionally. As with all attempts at reformulating Stevens' poetical beliefs in the language of abstract theory, Suberchicot's book sometimes has trouble remaining as variegated and self-contradictory as its subject matter. It also succumbs upon occasion to the law of diminishing returns. If Stevens' merit as a poet lies in his endlessly surprising capacity for aesthetical originality in composing his ongoing series of variations on a handful of themes, then theoreticians tend to have a much harder time injecting their own abstract variations with an equally satisfying life. It is only when the theoretical exfoliations manage to elucidate textual cruxes or to enhance our intellectual grasp and aesthetical appreciation of particular texts that they exert their own seductions in return. This, fortunately, is frequently also the case in this book, for Suberchicot proves himself a highly perceptive and experienced critic who boldly goes where few critics have gone before. Admirably, he is at his most brilliant when his topic is at its most difficult and resistant (the poetry of the middle to late 1940s), even though the ideas and theories he then elaborates are by necessity also the most speculative and the least verifiable or falsifiable. This speculative strain will probably be no great worry to a critic who always has the capacious intelligence of his own mind to fall back on.

Bart Eeckhout
University of Ghent, Belgium

News and Comments

The Wallace Stevens Society is now the proud owner of its own domain. For updated information on the society or the journal, consult our new Web site: www.wallacestevens.com.

* * *

William T. Ford has unearthed a reference to the elusive word *firecat* in Robert H. Busch's *The Cougar Almanac: A Complete Natural History of the Mountain Lion* (New York: Lyons & Burford, 1996): "Today the cougar is known by a myriad of monikers, including mountain lion, catamount (cat-of-the-mountain), ghost cat, king cat, devil cat, Indian devil, deer tiger, yellow tiger, red tiger, panther, painter (a corruption of panther), and screamer. One eager researcher uncovered over three dozen other names in the English language alone. . . . Puget Sound Natives called it the Fire Cat, believing that, in the fall of each year, the great cat carried fire from the Olympic Mountains to Mount Rainier, starting a forest fire along the way" (16).

* * *

The second annual Wallace Stevens Memorial Poetry Reading took place on June 19, 1999, during Rose Festival Weekend in Hartford's Elizabeth Park. Sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, in cooperation with the Friends of Elizabeth Park and with support from the Hartford Public Library, the event featured readings by Sue Ellen Thompson, author of *The Marriage Boat* and *This Body of Silk*, and by Krishna Hayes and Megan Greenleaf, two young poets from Hartford-area schools. James Longenbach, author of *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, was also to read his poetry but could not make it to Hartford because of travel difficulties in Philadelphia.

* * *

Stevens' poetry was also featured in a reading held in Austin, Texas, on July 31, 1999, as reported by Gary Martt. The event, which included poems by William Carlos Williams as well as by WS, read by David Sharpe and Gary Martt, was presented by the Past Poetry Project and the Austin Public Library.

* * *

A young chamber ensemble called "Eighth Blackbird" made their television debut on CBS Sunday Morning in November 1998, and were featured in the January 4, 1999, *New York Times*. With two strings, two winds, piano, and percussion, the sextet plays exclusively new music, i.e., that written in the last twenty to thirty years. Formed when the members were undergraduates at Oberlin College, the group most recently participated in the exclusive Artist Diploma in Chamber Music program of the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. In addition to taking their name from Stevens' poem, the musicians often perform a piece called "Thirteen Ways," written for them by Thomas

Albert, father of one of the musicians, Matt Albert. An upcoming recording, "Round Nut Tool," may be ordered on the group's Web site www.eighth-blackbird.com where the performance schedule is posted.

* * *

Writing in *The Absolute Sound* (no. 115, December 1998), John Marks invokes Wallace Stevens' poetry in a column on buying stereo equipment, entitled "A Stereo for Mr. Stevens." Marks quotes from Stevens' poem "Of Mere Being," pointing out that, for the poet, meaning is conveyed by sound and music; Marks then goes on to list the components necessary for a high-end system worthy of Stevens' ideals.

* * *

With a grant from Film Arts Foundation, San Francisco filmmaker Dan Weir will produce a short film titled "Thirteen Ways . . ." in early 2000. The film will combine images of a Northern California town's annual crow infestation with Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Weir hopes to create a visual equivalent of haiku, updating the form as Stevens did in his famous poem.

* * *

In April, Connecticut Public Television devoted part of its regular program "Connecticut Journal" to a special segment on WS. The primary focus concerned local efforts to make Stevens' legacy better known in Hartford.

* * *

From Glen MacLeod comes word that Mark Doty was the featured poet in April at the University of Connecticut's thirty-seventh annual Wallace Stevens Poetry Program, sponsored by the Hartford Insurance Company. Over two days, Doty read his own poems on the university campus at Storrs and at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford, and he presented awards to winners of the student poetry contest.

* * *

Helen Vendler was the featured speaker for the fourth annual WS Birthday Bash at the Hartford Public Library, on October 2, 1999. Sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of WS and the Connecticut Center for the Book, the event was accompanied by an exhibition of Stevens-inspired calligraphy by Margaret Shepherd that remained on view through the month of October.

* * *

On July 17, 1999, in a program entitled "Late Afternoon with Wallace Stevens," Joel Dempsey and Adam Bruns presented *A Ceremony* and *Carlos among the Candles* at the Pure Drop Stage, on the premises of Boxcar, Ink in Cushing, Maine. Audience members were welcomed onto the property by staggered, taped readings of poems by Stevens emanating from two machines in the weeds. An array of arts—featuring Dempsey's own paintings and posters of selected Stevens poems and epigrams from "Adagia"—surrounded the

patio area, where two dozen playgoers from around the country convened. Speaking from a rostrum, Dempsey recited *A Ceremony*, and Bruns, in full tuxedo and tails but with bare feet, performed *Carlos among the Candles*.

* * *

This has been a banner year for the sale of WS rare books and manuscripts. The Christie's New York auction on November 24, 1998, contained 13 lots of material, including first editions of *Owl's Clover*, *Esthétique du Mal*, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, and *Harmonium*. A few weeks later, on December 15, a Sotheby's auction in New York included a first edition of *Esthétique du Mal*, with an estimate of \$3,000–\$4,000.

The same copy of *Harmonium* (in nearly perfect dust jacket, inscribed to Meade Harwell), sold in the November Christie's auction, subsequently appeared in an early spring 1999 catalogue from James S. Jaffe Rare Books of Haverford, Pa., devoted entirely to WS. The sale consisted of 132 lots of rare books and manuscripts, plus books about WS and miscellaneous items. William T. Ford reports that this copy of *Harmonium* sold for \$14,500, by far the highest price ever paid for any Stevens title.

From Ford also comes word that in November, 1998, Heritage Book Shop in Los Angeles offered several unpublished letters from WS to Vivienne Koch, editor of *Briarcliff Quarterly*, dealing with the submission of poems for publication. Offered in individual lots, the letters brought \$650–\$850 each. Another Stevens letter offered in 1998 was written to Witter Bynner with an enclosed letter from J. Ronald Lane Latimer of the Alcestis Press, whose extensive correspondence with Stevens did not survive. The letter and enclosure sold for \$1,250.

Most recently, Catalogue 159 from William Reese Company of New Haven, Conn., lists a first edition of *Opus Posthumous*, with dust jacket, for \$150.

* * *

Thanks go to the Lannan Foundation for its continued generosity in contributing \$2,000 to help support *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library

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3. "'The Human That Is the Alien': Ecology and Otherness
in Wallace Stevens and A. R. Ammons," Gyorgyi Voros,
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Respondent: Alicia Ostriker, Rutgers University, New
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