WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

Wallace Stevens: Hypotheses and Contradictions

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> The torment of fastidious thought grew slack,
> Another, still more bellicose, came on.
> *The Comedian as the Letter C* [1]

> *The Concept Of The Arrière-Penseur*
> *Reason's Constant Ruin*
> (Two of Stevens's titles for poems never written)[2]

> There is no reality; there is the human consciousness ceaselessly forming, reforming, earning, suffering, spiritually stamping worlds from its creative property. . . . In this capacity . . . the uppermost [step] says: there is only the idea, the great, objective idea. It is eternity; it is the world order; it lives by abstraction; it is the formula or art. (Gottfried Benn, *The Way of an Intellectualist*)[3]

> Your art has deserted the temples and the sacrificial vessels, it has ceased to have anything to do with the painting of pillars, and the painting of chapels is no longer anything for you either. You are using your own skin for wallpaper, and nothing can save you. (Gottfried Benn, *Artists and Old Age*)[4]

I AM HAPPY TO CONTINUE, by this lecture on an American poet, the literary history of poetry begun in such a memorable way by Thomas Warton. Though my title names hypotheses and contradictions as two

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[1] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1954), 37, henceforth cited as CP with parenthetical page references in text.

[2] Cited from Wallace Stevens' notebook *From Pieces of Paper*, in George Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1986), 183.

[3] Gottfried Benn, *Prose, Essays, Poems*, ed. Volkmar Sander (New York, 1987), 33.

[4] Ibid., 183.

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aspects of the work of the poet Wallace Stevens, I think of these practices as his *ifs* and *ors* and *buts*. These three words, representing speculation on the one hand, and obstruction of speculation on the other, play a visibly large role in Stevens's poetry. To remark on Stevens's need for these forms of thought, and yet his late resistance to them, is one way to track his evolution—and his idiosyncrasy—as a poet. I hope to show that by using, questioning, and eventually forsaking these rhetorical means, Stevens over time seeks out truth in different ways. First, by dialectical means, he looks for 'the' truth; then, adopting a Nietzschean multiplicity, he argues for 'truths'; but in his late work he aims to approach, by a series of asymptotic figures, 'a' truth plausible to his exacting mind.

Stevens's poems were written during the fifty years between his matriculation at Harvard and his death at seventy-five. His long life was relatively without incident: he was born, in Pennsylvania, of Pennsylvania Dutch—that is to say German—extraction in 1879; his father, Garrett Stevens, was a lawyer who wanted his sons to be lawyers, and all three of them eventually obeyed him. Garrett Stevens was willing to send his brilliant son Wallace to Harvard, but would support him there for only three years, since one could enter law school after three years at the university. On his departure without a degree from Harvard, Stevens, disregarding his father's wishes, did not immediately enter law school, but became a newspaper reporter in New York. Discouraged by both the work and the salary, Stevens capitulated and went to New York University Law School, after which he had various disappointing short-term positions as a lawyer in New York. In 1916 he found a job as a surety lawyer with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Insurance Company of Connecticut, where he remained till he died in 1955.

In the first years of Stevens's employment at the Hartford his work was arduous, requiring frequent train-travel across the United States to investigate insurance claims, and in those years Stevens wrote little poetry. Eventually, as he rose in the company, his life became less harried, and when he was 44, he published his first book, *Harmonium*, with Knopf. Other volumes followed steadily, and in l954, some months before Stevens's death from cancer, his *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Since his death, his fame has grown steadily, but he remains, in the eyes of us all, a difficult poet, the one who wrote, in a collection of pensées to which he gave the Erasmian title *Adagia*, that a poem 'must resist the intelligence almost successfully'.

Although Stevens's life had many ecstatic moments, it was not in the usual sense a happy life. His marriage became increasingly difficult, as his

beautiful but uneducated wife Elsie—once the model for the American Liberty dime—retreated into homesickness, estrangement, and suspicion: no friends or acquaintances could be invited to the house, not even by the child of the marriage, Stevens's daughter Holly. Each night, after dinner, Stevens retreated to his small separate study and bedroom upstairs, where he read, listened to music, wrote letters, and composed poetry. It was an intensely lonely life, relieved by occasional trips to New York museums, and by his eventually good relations with his daughter and her son Peter.

At Harvard, Stevens had abandoned the Protestantism of his parents for the skeptical Lucretian naturalism of his acquaintance George Santayana. This philosophic materialism was buttressed by Stevens's intimate knowledge of the natural world: he was a great walker in his youth, often covering thirty miles in a single day. Spring warmed him into life; winter chilled him into despair. He became the most exquisite poet of seasonal change since Keats, by whom he was permanently influenced. Many of Stevens's early poems became intelligible to readers through their relation to Romantic verse: *Sunday Morning*, for instance, ends in homage to Keats's *To Autumn*. Instead of Keats's agricultural and domestic landscape, populated by lambs, robins, and swallows, Stevens's American scene offers mountains and an uncultivated wilderness, populated by deer, quail, and pigeons. Keats's goddess of the season has vanished, and human beings exist in isolation:

> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.
> [70]

As a young reader, I could move easily into such a poem; it was only a step from Keats to the Keatsian elements in Stevens. I had far more trouble in understanding why Stevens would write certain other poems, among them the one that opened *Harmonium* (and which is still the first piece one sees in the *Collected Poems*). I realised that this strategically placed poem, *Earthy Anecdote*, must be some sort of manifesto, but of what was it the proclamation? Like most conceptual art, this 1918 poem[5]

[5] Dates cited for individual poems in this essay follow those given in Holly Stevens, ed., *Wallace Stevens: The Palm at the End of the Mind* (New York, 1972), ix–xv.

offers no elaboration of its stubbornly repeated plot—that of a daily contest between deer (fiercely charging straight ahead) and a mountain lion (named by its folk-appellation, 'firecat') that obtrudes itself in the path of the bucks:

Earthy Anecdote

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,
They went clattering,
Until they swerved

In a swift, circular line
To the right,
Because of the firecat.
Or until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the left,
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.
[3]

The firecat's only purpose in his waking hours is to make the bucks swerve. The game goes on all day, conceived and prolonged by the bright eyes of the firecat, and it comes to an end only when the firecat sleeps. Had the firecat not 'bristled in the way' the bucks would have unswervingly clattered over the plain of Oklahoma in an unimpeded straight line.

At least one way of reading this little parable is to see it as an enacting of the response of the mind's original inertia when it encounters new hypotheses and then contradictions of these very hypotheses. Once our thoughts are set on an inertial straight path, they will not become inventive unless blocked: and one can see the bucks as a form of uncreative life forced into creativity by the bright-eyed obstacle of intelligence. In Stevens, the obstacle that forces the swerve is dialectically self-created: *ifs* and *ors* and *buts*, with their bright-eyed queries, force the mind into alternative paths. I believe that this apparently trivial little poem revealed to

Stevens, as he wrote it, how much his art depended on obstructions and the consequent swerves provoked by them, and that he therefore gave *Earthy Anecdote* pride of place both in his first volume and in the final collection of his poems.

When in 1922 Stevens comes to organise his long Browningesque autobiography in verse, *The Comedian as the Letter C*, he does so by means of successive geographic hypotheses, each contradicting the former. Should the poet remain in Bordeaux, within the European tradition? or translate himself to the Yucatan, where the new world is the savage landscape discovered by Columbus and the conquistadors? or move to North America's placid and warm English-settled Southern states? Stevens eventually decides for the last of these, and his hero Crispin, treated with comic irony, settles down in the Carolinas, in 'a nice shady home' with a 'prismy blonde' for a wife, and four 'daughters with curls' [40, 42, 43]. Mistakenly, Stevens stops while Crispin is still dwelling in the South: 'Crispin knew / It was a flourishing tropic he required / For his refreshment' [35]. Later, in 1936, affected by the failure of his marriage and the shock of the Depression, Stevens will write the elegiac *Farewell to Florida*, declaring that he must now seek his fate in the North: 'My North is leafless and lies in a wintry slime' [118]. Because Stevens' speculations in *The Comedian* on the poet's proper geographic home, and the contradiction of Crispin's Romantic aspiration by domestic curtailment, are ensconced within a plot, they are, for this reason, both more visible (because narrated of a protagonist) and less visible (because overgrown by picaresque picturesqueness) than they will be when they appear in more metaphysical form, in those brief parables and anecdotes that Stevens came to prefer, because of their abstraction, to quasi-mimetic, even if allegorical, narrative.

If we turn away from Crispin's narrative to Stevensian lyric, we can see how hypothesis becomes for Stevens a firecat-stimulus to a creative swerve. In a 1923 manifesto, *The Idea of Order at Key West,* Stevens examines, by means of successive hypotheses and contradictions, the relation between lyric language and the element of nature it purports to translate. The speaker, walking with a companion, hears a girl singing on the shore, and asks the relation of her song to the sea:

> Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
> It was the spirit that we sought and knew
> That we should ask this often as she sang.
> [129]

The question, 'Whose spirit is this?' prompts a set of hypotheses followed, as we might expect, by a contradiction:

If it was only the *dark* voice
of the *sea*
That rose
or even
[**if**]
colored by many waves;
If it was only the *outer* voice
of *sky* and *cloud,*
of the sunken *coral* water-walled,
however clear,
it would have been deep *air*,
the heaving speech
of *air*,
a summer sound
repeated in a summer without end
and sound alone.
But it was more than that,
more even than
her voice
and ours,
among the meaningless plungings
of *water* and the *wind*,
theatrical distances
bronze shadows heaped on high horizons
mountainous atmospheres
of *sky* and *sea*.
[129]

This sort of elaboration becomes typical of Stevens's opulent middle style. Of what use to him, we ask, are such *if*s, such *but*s? The *if*s here represent temptations towards certain theoretical positions, especially those attributing human art to nothing grander than animal instinct, an evolutionary instinct that prompts us to reflect the various items of our environment, as, say, the mocking-bird does. Perhaps we do nothing but transcribe blindly the example of the sea, and the darkness of our song reproduces its darkness; if our song takes on colors, they have been conferred by the colors of the sea's iridescent waves. Or perhaps if our song by the seashore takes on yet other colors, not of the sea, they are borrowed from the surrounding context—blue sky, white cloud, and red coral. Were blind imitation the case, the girl's song, Stevens argues, would have been sound alone, breath alone, as birdsong is. Her song would have

been an imitative vocalise, as meaningless—in its exercise of the animal instinct for melodic expression—as the great physical displays of the natural sublime of sky and sea.

To elaborate, in this way, a possible Darwinian theory of poetry, and to enclose in it a theatrical Wordsworthian mimetic hymn to the 'mountainous atmospheres of sky and sea', sets in relief the alternate poetic Stevens is about to proffer, which is introduced by one of his useful contradictory *but*s—'But it was more than that.' The new poetic is neither instinctual nor mimetic; it is an abstract one of intellectual artifice, of exact measurement, of geometric lines and demarcated spatial zones. At the end of the poem, when the poet and his companion turn away from the shore toward the town, they find that their surroundings have been charted and made intelligible by the words of the singer, in the same invisible way in which the globe has been charted by geographers who create invisible lines of latitude and longitude, marking out the North and South poles and fixing zones above and below the equator. Because of the singer's song,

> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
> [129–30]

Stevens's final interpretation of the maker's *furor poeticus*, the 'blessed rage for order', is secure only because it has been arrived at after he has given a full display, by means of his *if*s and *but*s, of both Darwinian determinism and of the submissive mimetic sublime of Wordsworth's *Elegiac Stanzas*, 'that rueful sky, that pageantry of fear', a phrase akin to 'mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea'. Stevens's inching progressions—'If . . . or . . . If . . . But . . . more . . . more'—track a mind at work investigating its first thoughts and rejecting them for a more accurate one—one that announces the spirit's mastery, by the geometrical abstraction afforded by lyric language, of the sublime landscape of the night sky.

How far can the poet carry speculative hypotheses and fertile contradictions? In deciding to write, in 1937, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, a theoretically interminable sequence in a new populist style, Stevens proposes that one can entertain multiple hypotheses and successive contradictions if they are juxtaposed to one another in a Cubist multiperspectival space:

> Is this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard
> Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves,
>
> Now, an image of our society?
> [173]

In this Nietzschean realm, every description destroys another description, every mouth proclaims a different point of view. We find ourselves in a Mallarméan world in which the supreme ruler is the plural poetic word (of which the 'amorist Adjective aflame' of the sky's unlimited 'blue' is the paradigm). Here, the demands of logical consistency are repudiated as unwelcome 'pale intrusions into blue':

> The pale intrusions into blue
> Are corrupting pallors . . . ay di mi,
>
> Blue buds or pitchy blooms. Be content—
> Expansions, diffusions—content to be
>
> The unspotted imbecile revery,
> The heraldic center of the world
>
> Of blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins,
> The amorist Adjective aflame . . .
> [172]

Although we find, in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, many hypotheses and contradictions, Stevens now experiments with deleting, in various instances, the expected prefacing signals, *if* and *but*. This tactic produces, as in canto XXVII, obdurate sets of implied hypotheses in which parallel statements either mutually contradict one another or else stand in logically oblique relations to each other. Here we find the sea again, but it is far less intelligible than it was when it stood simply for physical nature in *The Idea of Order at Key West*. Many speculative hypotheses about the sea, in no clear relation one to the other, are entertained, but no *ifs*, *ors*, or *buts* are allowed to appear. The mind's conjecturings, obstructions, and swervings give rise to a series of independent statements, with all logical junctures suppressed as they might be in a succession of objective *prises*, or seizings, of a natural phenomenon:

> It is the sea that whitens the roof.
> The sea drifts through the winter air.
>
> It is the sea that the north wind makes.
> The sea is in the falling snow.
>
> This gloom is the darkness of the sea.
> Geographers and philosophers,

Regard. But for that salty cup,
But for the icicles on the eaves—

The sea is a form of ridicule.
The iceberg settings satirize

The demon that cannot be himself,
That tours to shift the shifting scene.
[179–80]

Shifting shifting scenes is now the perplexing task of the poet's 'daimon' that cannot be himself, cannot possess a fixed identity or a fixed truth. Stevens does not want to remain in a masked world of unfixed phenomena, since he still yearns for truth and a stable poetic. Yet, 'There is no place, // Here, for the lark fixed in the mind, / In the museum of the sky' [182]. Where will stability, then, be found? Nowhere, in much of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*.

Stevens's contradictions reappear in a slightly later poem, one despairing of any future stability, the 1942 *Cuisine Bourgeoise*, a piece composed almost entirely of hypotheses, denials, and questions. It begins with a grim scene: 'These days of disinheritance, we feast / On human heads' [227]. After a dismissal of the moribund past ('But that's all done. It is what used to be'), *Cuisine Bourgeoise* launches itself into a frustrating present of betweenness. It does this by means of a series of arid definitions, hypothetical similes, mini-hypotheses in the form of words in apposition, and—in a final alienation in which the governing pronoun changes from 'we' to 'they'—hopeless questions:

It is like the season when, after summer,
It is summer and it is not, it is autumn
And it is not, it is day and it is not,
As if last night's lamps continued to burn,
As if yesterday's people continued to watch
The sky, half porcelain, preferring that
To shaking out heavy bodies in the glares
Of this present, this science, this unrecognized,
This outpost, this douce, this dumb, this dead, in which
We feast on human heads. . . .
. . . This bitter meat
Sustains us. . . . Who, then, are they, seated here?
Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?
Are they men eating reflections of themselves?
[228]

In Stevens's work, a series of words in apposition almost always represents a set of compressed hypotheses. In order to show the rapidity with

which Stevens, in his later period, adopts and discards speculative proposals, I stop a moment here on his serial nouns describing the present in *Cuisine Bourgeoise*. This series is remarkable because in it there appears the one distinctly *non-hopeless* word of the poem, the French adjective 'douce,' here transformed into a noun. 'This present' is interestingly first hypothesised to be 'this science'—since science is the dominant modern frame demanding from the poet a fresh description of the universe. This characterisation of the present is dismissed by declaring that we find less unsettling the knowledge purveyed by science than the vast quantity of ignorance ('this unrecognised') it reveals. No longer the Ptolemaic centre of the universe, we have become 'this outpost', a planet knowing nothing of the centre from which it originated. In the middle of such a bleak portrayal of the present we are surprised to find a new, wholly alternative Stevensian hypothesis in the unexpected phrase, 'this douce'. Admitting the melting sweetness of physical experience even in an unintelligible world, Stevens at last has something to write about—but how can he, in 'this dumb'—the next hypothesis, which recognises a failure of speech intensifying the failure of cognition expressed in 'this unrecognised.'

Why does Stevens present some of his appositive hypotheses here as nouns, and some as adjectives-turned-nouns? We can see that the hypotheses about the present embodied in true nouns are focused on *external* reality—this *present* (the twentieth century), this *science* (the new frame), this *outpost* (the marginalised planet). By contrast, the hypotheses that are phrased in nouns derived from adjectives have to do with the poet's *inner* world—what it recognises, what it finds sweet, what it wants to utter in language. This grammatical division of labour makes the hypothesis articulated in the final adjectival noun, the climax of the series, so cutting: 'this *dead*' is, by its adjectival grammar, seen to be an internal quality. Although earlier in the poem death was imagined externally as a quality belonging to the ingested 'human heads' of the past, it now migrates into the subjective world of the poet himself. It is no coincidence that 'head' rhymes with 'dead'.

Stevens attempts to contest his nihilist deadness even as he voices it, and we can see his first efforts toward a recovery of confidence in certain minor poems, such as 'Forces, The Will & the Weather' [228–9] and 'On an Old Horn' [230]. In the second of these, the Darwinian doubts of *The Idea of Order* return in force ('The bird kept saying that birds had once been men, / Or were to be, animals with men's eyes, / Men fat as feathers'), and the poet finds solace only in a precarious set of wavering self-contradictory assertions:

In the little of his voice, or the like,
Or less, he found a man, or more, against
Calamity, proclaimed himself, was proclaimed.
[230]

Yet in spite of such transitory consolations, the deadness of *Cuisine Bourgeoise* persists. In *Transport to Summer* (1947), a Darwinian bestiality returns in force as the once-joyous man with the guitar reappears in the poem *Jouga*, its title deformed from the Spanish *jugar*, 'to play.' Both the physical world of *The Idea of Order at Key West* and the human world of *Cuisine Bourgeoise* are now meaningless. The name of the guitar-player, 'Jaime' (Spanish for 'James,' perhaps containing a disillusioned pun on the French 'J'aime') is distorted into a series of meaningless phonemes, Ha-eé-me, just as his notes become unmelodic 'noise', and his guitar is dehumanised to a beast:

Jouga

The physical world is meaningless tonight
And there is no other. There is Ha-eé-me, who sits
And plays his guitar. Ha-eé-me is a beast.

Or perhaps his guitar is a beast or perhaps they are
Two beasts. But of the same kind—two conjugal beasts.
Ha-eé-me is the male beast . . . an imbecile,

Who knocks out a noise. The guitar is another beast
Beneath his tip-tap-tap. It is she that responds.
Two beasts but two of a kind and then not beasts.

Yet two not quite of a kind. It is like that here.
[337]

The *but*s and *or*s and *perhaps*es and *not*s here reveal the bitterness and self-loathing of the poet confronting an apparently untransformable external world. When Stevens's last resort of joy, the physical world, becomes meaningless it renders the virtual world of language and music meaningless as well. The instability of the physical world had already reached, in the 1939 *Variations on a Summer Day*, as far as Keats's North Star, elegiacally subjected by Stevens to a drifting delineation which thins down further and further:

Star over Monhegan, Atlantic star,
Lantern without a bearer, you drift,
You, too, are drifting, in spite of your course,
Unless in the darkness, brightly-crowned,
You are the will, if there is a will,
Or the portent of a will that was,
One of the portents of the will that was.
[232–33]

A poet cannot write indefinitely in this oscillating and self-repudiating vein, qualifying his every statement with *unless* and *if* and *or*. How will Stevens escape his uncertainty? Can he arrive at a point of more stable assertion? If steadfast truth does not reside in the North Star, where is it to be found?

Stevens escapes uncertainty at first—and perhaps even at last—by incorporating into his poetic the idea of necessity. This necessity may be moral or aesthetic or historical, or it may be referred to the physical laws of nature. It has already made its appearance, rather theatrically bearing its Greek name, in the 1936 *Owl's Clover*: 'Fatal Ananke is the common god'.[6] Its more common appearance in Stevens is by means of the repeated modal forms *has to* and *must*, visible in the 1940 manifesto *Of Modern Poetry*. Here, philosophical truth is defined not as proposition but as process: the mind's 'act of finding / What will suffice.' And the new poetic of process is prompted by moral obligation; the mind of the modern poet is bound by social and historical duty:

> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice. It has
> To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage. . . .
> It must
> Be the finding of a satisfaction.
> [240]

There is much that could be said about this hinge of modal obligation and necessity, which mediates between middle and late Stevens, but I can only remark here the change it represents. There is not an *if* nor an *or* nor a *but* to be seen in this passage; not an *as if* nor a *like*. (I should confess that later in the poem Stevens's signals of qualification—*like*, *not*, *but*—do appear briefly, but they are firmly put aside in favour of another *must*.) The Stevens who earlier luxuriated in dialectical speculation now prefers the blind assertions of a desperate necessity. To justify the necessity, Stevens leaves solitude behind, and demands that his work 'face the men of the time' and 'meet the women of the time'. *Of Modern Poetry* voices Stevens's temporary conversion to the colloquial and the social, and to the use of a public rhetoric.

[6] Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton Bates (New York, 1989), 89, henceforth cited as OP with parenthetical page references in text.

This 'conversion,' prompted by the social convulsions of the Depression and World War II, was not one that Stevens could always maintain; but the poetic of process, of 'finding' that it elicited did spring the poet free from the sterile consumptions and reflections of *Cuisine Bourgeoise*, forcing him to think of a means for looking forward. He begins by analysing his own rebellious disposition, which had always prompted him to contest the received truths of his culture. In the 1940 poem *Landscape with Boat*, Stevens chastises himself for having been hitherto insufficiently fertile in 'supposing', in spite of all the supposing he had done earlier with his *ifs* and *ors*. He was mistaken, he tells us, in supposing that there existed a final propositional 'truth beyond all truths', one that would forever put an end to conjecture. He advances, now, by an inching logic of contradiction and hypothesising, to a final positive assertion. In saying 'The world itself was the truth', Stevens accepts a materialist, rather than a propositional, notion of truth:

> It was his nature to suppose,
> To receive what others had supposed, without
> Accepting. He received what he denied.
> But as truth to be accepted, he supposed
> A truth beyond all truths.
>
> He never supposed
> That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
> That the things that he rejected might be part. . . .
> He never supposed divine
> Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
> Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
> And that if nothing was the truth, then all
> Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.
> [242]

This dismissal of *'the* truth' as an intellectual figment—'Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.' as Stevens says in the 1940 poem *The Man on the Dump* [201]—and the substitution for it of the laws (and beauties) of the material universe, each of which, in Emersonian fashion, has *a* symbolic truth to tell, liberated Stevens from the constantly undermining of speculation by contradiction, while leaving him open, at least from time to time, to using hypotheses and objections more casually.

In working towards a poetic that is one of process, but also one that can make positive assertions that can resist subversion or contradiction, Stevens reaches increasingly often—as in the 1943 poem *Somnambulisma*—

for formulations which will not deny poetry's origin in the animal evolution of language, but which will equally not deny poetry's role in the highest domain of knowledge. Even in that highest domain, the Stevensian poet is not Plato's philosopher king: in a democracy, he is surrounded not by regalia but (winningly) by personalia. The origin of what the poet pours forth in language is in part animal, in part spiritual: but whether we choose to see the poet as evolutionary bird or Emersonian American scholar, he undeniably makes the material world pregnant with reflected human meaning. As *Somnambulisma* returns to the shore of *The Idea of Order at Key West*, we can see how the necessary social relation of the poet to his fellows, declared in *Of Modern Poetry*, rescues Stevens from materialist solipsism, and enables a triple hybrid refiguring of the poet as the vernacular ocean, an archetypal restless bird, and a solitary scholar:

Somnambulisma

On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls
Noiselessly, noiselessly, resembling a thin bird,
That thinks of settling, yet never settles, on a nest.

The wings keep spreading and yet are never wings.
The claws keep scratching on the shale, the shallow shale,
The sounding shallow, until by water washed away.

The generations of the bird are all
By water washed away. They follow after.
They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.

Without this bird that never settles, without
Its generations that follow in their universe,
The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,

Would be a geography of the dead: not of that land
To which they may have gone, but of the place in which
They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being,

In which no scholar, separately dwelling,
Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia,
Which, as a man feeling everything, were his.
[304]

Without the poet, according to *Somnambulisma*, those of his generation would be deprived of a living sense of their own emotional experience, and the world surrounding them, if uncommented-on by the poet, would be 'a geography of the dead'. The Stevensian compulsion to speculate and hypothesise is here imagined first as the restless rolling of the ocean, and

next as a bird's inability—represented by intensives of the present progressive tense—to settle on a nest. The 'generations' of the poem are borrowed from Keats's odes to the nightingale and the Grecian urn—from 'No hungry generations tread thee down' and 'When old age shall this generation waste'. The music of *Somnambulisma* comes from Tennyson's song, 'The splendor falls on castle walls . . . Dying, dying, dying', and from *The Passing of Arthur*—'And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight'. What is uniquely Stevensian, here, is the hybrid creation of the ocean-bird-scholar, and the startlingly complex effusion of marine fins, aerial beaks, and human personalia that pour forth from the intensities of the solitary poet's feeling. He feels, after all, 'everything'.

In admitting the function of both animal instinct (in the bird) and emotional intellect (in the scholar feeling everything) in the formation of poetry, Stevens can lay to rest his Darwinian suspicion that poetry might not be a form of knowledge. What he has discovered is the indispensable contribution of the poet's 'invisible geography' to the 'visible geography' of the earth, a 'geography'—as he wrote in an essay—'that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there'.[7]

What becomes of Stevens's speculative *if*s and *or*s and *but*s in his late work? These words cease for the most part to represent obstacles, and become—to put it briefly—accretive, elaborative, and asymptotic instead of alternative and exclusive. In 1949, the 31-canto sequence *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* begins by announcing its subject—'the eye's plain version . . ., the vulgate of experience'—and adds, 'Of this, / A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—/ As part of the never-ending meditation' [465]. The *and yet*s are resistant yet additive, like the turning leaves of a book in this 'endlessly elaborating poem' [486]. Elaboration, rather than contradiction, has now become a fundamental principle of composition. And although Stevens begins *An Ordinary Evening* with two rebuttals—saying that the poem is 'part of the res itself and not about it', and that the poet speaks the poem 'as it is, / Not as it was', these merely clear the ground for positive assertion. The space where the poem takes place is increasingly an ever-mobile and yet—because fixed in words—immobile present:

> The poem is the cry of its occasion,
> Part of the res itself and not about it.
> The poet speaks the poem as it is,

[7] 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', in *The Necessary Angel* (New York, 1951).

> Not as it was. . . .
>
> There is no
> Tomorrow for him.
>
> The mobile and the immobile flickering
> In the area between is and was are leaves,
> Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees
>
> And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
> Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
> Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,
>
> In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
> The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
> Together, said words of the world are the life of the world.
> [473–74]

Multiple truths here coexist additively without strain. The flickering is both mobile and immobile; the leaves exist (in life) in burnished trees and (as pages) in whirlings in the gutters; the leaves (as a single poem-*gestalt*) resemble the presence of thought while (as an evolving sequence of processes) they resemble the presences of thoughts. Just as the life of the world is multiple, so are the words of the world.

But by the end of *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*—a poem which tends to abandon a materialistic poetry for a virtual one—even the accreting leaves and thoughts seem insufficiently immaterial symbols for the mind's attempt to create a coalescence of outer and inner reality. In canto XXXI, Stevens represents 'the edgings and inchings of final form' as activities by which desire asymptotically approaches its goal. These are

> The swarming activities of the formulae
> Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,
>
> Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
> A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,
> A woman writing a note and tearing it up.
> [488]

Each of these instantiations of 'getting at' complements the others: we see the evening investigating more and more tints as it tries to evoke the whole spectrum of violet; a philosopher hoping to progress from scales to, say, a Chopin étude; a woman resorting to destruction so as to approach more nearly to perfection. The successive attempts in all these activities lead Stevens to his finest discrimination as he concludes that reality itself need not be conceived of in physical terms:

> It is not in the premise that reality
> Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
> A dust, a force that traverses a shade.
> [489]

The first of Stevens's two closing suppositions—'it may be'—calls attention to itself because it is unidiomatic: we do not normally refer to 'a' dust. This traversable dust resembles the Biblical pillar of cloud: it is our physical self imagined as the sum of its mortal collective atoms. This 'dust' is sufficiently permeable to be traversed by a shade—a tint, a hue. Or, in the second of the suppositions, reality may be not a shade but a force—like gravity, like electricity—that traverses the self, which is now not a permeable dust, but a ghostly shade. We scarcely have words for these elusive and delicate traversings, but at least Stevens's language makes us aware that—as the title of a late poem asserts—'Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination':

> There was an insolid billowing of the solid.
> Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air.
> [136]

In 1948, Stevens wrote that 'central experiment is one of the constants of the spirit which is inherent in a true record of experience'. This statement [OP, 313] suggests that what we have been following—in tracking the poet's earlier hypotheses and contradictions, his mid-career elaborations and appositions, and his later accretions and asymptotic figures—is his struggle to render first philosophical 'truth', then Cubist perspectival 'truths', then 'a truth', something more personal and intimate. When he is seeking for philosophical 'truth', conceiving of it as an absolute, he relies on a dialectical *either/or* characterised by hypotheses and contradictions. When he is seeking for perspectival 'truths', he relies, as in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, on endless elaboration, or, as in *Cuisine Bourgeoise*, on appositions. When he is seeking 'a' positive personal truth, he approaches it asymptotically, suggesting various metaphors, each of which comes in some way close to the essence of his desire.

There are many beautiful late poems with which to close my topic, but I want to single out two, both composed in 1954, Stevens's last full year of life. The first of these poems was written in March, the second in November [dated in OP, 324]. The March poem, *Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself*, is significant as the piece with which Stevens chose to conclude his *Collected Poems*—the pendant to *Earthy Anecdote*, with which the collection, and this essay, began. *Not Ideas about the Thing*

but the Thing Itself—a Kantian title claiming knowledge of the *Ding-an-sich*—harks back to many earlier poems—the desolate winter poem *The Snow Man*; the poem called *The Sun This March* ('The exceeding brightness of this early sun / Makes me conceive how dark I have become' [133]); the many bird-poems; *New Haven*'s assertion that the poem is the cry of its occasion; Stevens' own comic self-naming as the letter C—formerly printed in upper-case, now significantly, with the humility of the old, in lower-case. *Not Ideas* exhibits the familiar counters *but*, *not*, *or*, and *like*, but uses them without the uncertainty that used to attend their presence in Stevens's poems.

The plot of *Not Ideas* is a simple one: a speaker who has doubted that he would live to see another spring wakes up uncertain whether the bird-cry he has heard is real or part of a dream. The poem traces his growing conviction that it is real: yes, the sound must be coming from outside because the advancing season is confirmed by the earlier rising of a rejuvenated sun; and though the pale sun and the scrawny cry are merely premonitory heralds of the 'colossal sun' and the 'choir' yet to come, the eventual grandeur of the much-desired spring is implicit in its inception. The leap of the heart as the speaker realises that the axis of the seasons has turned, that spring is miraculously his once again, is like 'a new knowledge of reality'. We can watch, here, how all the early torturing words of uncertainty—*but, not*, *seem*, *like*, *or*, *part*—are now recruited to play felicitous roles in a drama of the renewal of life:

Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.
[534]

Stevens could not sustain this spring joy. *The Region November*, written only five months before the failing Stevens was finally found to have advanced stomach cancer, reveals that every sign of the mind's lively responses—conjectures, hypotheses, qualifications, comparisons, contradictions—can be abolished by the inertia of age and illness. In *The Region November*, the title suggests that this single winter month has become the space to which living has been reduced. As the poet hears the north wind, he watches it compel the monotonous swaying of the treetops. The trees say only the same thing, over and over, without fluctuation, modulation, correction, apposition, or speculation. They display the melancholy of the contentless, even if effortful, agglutinative inertial repetitions of age, void of any substance, divine, material, or human. The energetic Oklahoma of *Earthy Anecdote*, the rich American wilderness of *Sunday Morning,* has become a waste land of spiritual entropy:

The Region November

It is hard to hear the north wind again,
And to watch the treetops, as they sway.

They sway, deeply and loudly, in an effort,
So much less than feeling, so much less than speech,

Saying and saying, the way things say
On the level of that which is not yet knowledge:

A revelation not yet intended.
It is like a critic of God, the world,

And human nature, pensively seated
On the waste throne of his own wilderness.

Deeplier, deeplier, loudlier, loudlier,
The trees are swaying, swaying, swaying.
[OP, 140]

It is like the restless Stevens to turn the benign and inclusive poetic process of his late phase, visible in the asymptotic approach to spring of *Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself*, into its desolate obverse, the agglutinative elaboration of the meaningless into a repetitive swaying and a predicateless saying. Even Ha-eé-me of *Jouga* had his conjugal beast and its meaningful, if minute, sonic oscillation—*tip-tap-tap*. But

here tautology rules: deep is deep and loud is loud and the words *deeplier*, *deeplier*, *loudlier*, *loudlier* repeat a single monotonous sound that leads to no crescendo of promised being such as the colossal sun and its surrounding choir. In *The Region November*, the mind is in abeyance, and with it, all its wonderful and stimulating speculative instruments.

Recalling earlier poems, we can say that here the bucks have no firecat, the shore has no measuring singer, the world no cornucopia of parts, the guitar-player no instrument, the poet no responsive audience of men and women, the earth no scholar-bird effusing personalia. It is here, feeling the lack of the exhilarating Stevensian mimesis of the mind's fluctuations, that we realise that in spite of his frequent thematic bleakness, Stevens was above all a poet of fertility of speculative thought and verbal invention. His swerves, hypotheses, contradictions, hybridities, Cubist multiplicities, accretive elaborations, and asymptotic progressions establish in *The Collected Poems* a mental landscape anything but bleak, one that matches the distributed richness of the material world with its own unfailing engendering of emotional, intellectual, and linguistic forms—the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia.

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