Wallace Stevens:
Parts of an Autobiography, by Anonymous

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Certain passages in a handful of poems by Wallace Stevens flirt with personal self-reference. This is the case with "Yellow Afternoon" from Parts of a World, *for example. Some critics take such moments to reveal his views on contemporary social issues such as World War II; others read the same passages back into Stevens' biographically determinable circumstances. Yet the poems in question arguably inscribe their resistance to critical-biographical as well as social-historical templates, and in fact track his moving toward a theory of autobiographical writing. In those poems, one can say that he first seeks an aesthetic particularity, but then concedes their ethical import and regards himself as a representative self. However, late Stevens poems such as "World Without Peculiarity" and "Prologues to What Is Possible" edge toward the disappearance of self altogether. Paradoxically, that defines the point where they allow for an utterly "peculiar" mode of autobiographical writing.*

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> All general rules and precepts fail, because they proceed from the false assumption that men are constituted wholly, or almost wholly, alike. . . . Whereas the truth is that the original difference between individuals in intellect and morality is immeasurable.
>
> —Arthur Schopenhauer, *Ethical Reflections*

> The consciousness of *being* had grown hourly more indistinct, and that of mere *locality* had, in great measure, usurped its position. The idea of entity was becoming merged in that of *place*.
>
> —Edgar Allan Poe, "The Colloquy of Monos and Una"

> "Yes, well, what can you know about anybody?"
>
> —Bob Dylan, Interview, 1991

-1-

An unusual moment occurs in Wallace Stevens' poem "Yellow Afternoon" when he apparently refers to something about his private life, albeit thinly disguised in the third person. Holding that "in the earth only / . . . he was at the bottom of things," the Stevens persona confesses

> The thought that he had found all this
> Among men, in a woman — she caught his breath —
> But he came back as one comes back from the sun
> To lie on one's bed in the dark, close to a face
> Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.[1]

Despite this personal moment, the poem, published in 1940 at the start of World War II along with other poems collected in the volume entitled *Parts of a World* (1942), has invited critical glosses emphasizing its referential connection to that wartime situation. Indeed, the poem explicitly refers to "war" to buttress the persona's proposition about how "in the earth only" he felt himself "at the bottom of things." Whatever "earth" means for him, it at minimum provides him with a vision of "unity"

> that is the life one loves,
> So that one lives all the lives that comprise it
> As the life of the fatal unity of war.

James Longenbach regards this war-image as evidence for Stevens' "personal despair" in "thinking through the consequences of another violence on a global scale" (Longenbach 36). From a different but analogous perspective, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan links "Yellow Afternoon" to its "companion poem" in publication, "Martial Cadenza," in which Stevens airs but cannot sustain a politically "isolationist position" toward the looming war (Brogan 211). Either way, war, both critics hold, presses Stevens to sacrifice "parts" of himself — most notably, perhaps, his poetic proclivities — to thinking about the social whole.

Such glosses clearly have the salutary effect of rescuing Stevens from the not infrequent charge by critics of his egregious aloofness from social-political affairs, among them the wartime period in question. On the other hand, the same apologias fail to explain the poem's abrupt introduction of the intimate and even sexually figured "woman" near the poem's end: "— she caught his breath —." The "But" after the dash, moreover, complicates any social or even generic "earth" reading of the woman. In Poesque fashion, she instead abruptly turns into an equally intimate but faceless other "on one's bed." Is that figure a human "she," and if so, the same "woman," metamorphosed, say, into a ghostly double, which thus marks his *loss* of faith "in the earth"? This reading would endow the word "was" in the poem's first line with a literal, past-tense significance.

At minimum, the "But" suggests that even as the real "woman" promised to incarnate "the earth," in the end she failed to do so. To employ the title of an

early Stevens poem, she instead became an "earthy anecdote," that is, a transitory metonym for a belief in life that *might* have ordered his personal and/or social environment, but which now still exists for him in disunified "parts." One can nudge the poem toward other negative social intimations as well. If the ghostly figure figures Stevens' private, "interior paramour," that would again suggest a metamorphosis more consonant with a disaffection from social engagement than a resolve to commit to it. The poem, as a matter of fact, tracks something akin in how "he" moves away from the outside world, the "yellow afternoon," in all of its daytime, *i.e.*, social, splendor, to an interior room "in the dark," alone with a figure shed of attributes of human otherness: "Without eyes or mouth."

George Lensing senses this move, but opines that Stevens thereby means to quash discontent within his personal life. As if discarding the actual "woman," who from a biographical angle likely alludes to Stevens' wife, Elsie, he turns to a "ghostly lover" who represents "the earth itself that he has made into repose, consolation, and lover" (Lensing 3). This interpretation once more would insinuate his recovery of a heretofore lost wholeness. Stevens' reference to "earth" obviously accords with the "Fat girl, terrestrial" from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," written near the time of although not included in *Parts of a World* (*CPP* 351). Both there and here, the earthy figure evokes a grounded if elusive, holistic vision of life in terms of which anything (including discrete poetic moments like the present one) or anyone (like the specific "woman" encountered in a prior moment) appropriately comprises "parts" evolving toward Stevens' notion of a "world" vision at large.

As a result, however, one could justifiably construe these parts as mere means to an end, in effect providing more evidence pointing to Stevens' social disaffection, this time according to a criterion holding to the ethical value of existential particularities ideally governing self-other relationships. The "woman" as other instead here becomes *mere* metonym, herself no more than a ghostly figure—indeed not unlike a passing figure of speech. As Stevens had envisaged in an earlier, unpublished poem "Red Loves Kit" (1924), his actual spouse surely might object to his ethically illicit, if also purely imaginary, "metaphysical" liaison:

> That you are innocent
> And love her still, still leaves you in the wrong.
> Where is that calm and where that ecstasy?
> Her words accuse you of adulteries
> That sack the sun, though metaphysical. (*CPP* 556)

Lensing thinks both "Yellow Afternoon" and "Red Loves Kit" exhibit Stevens' attempt to justify his "solitary" poetic life in the face of demands by others—whether intimates like his wife or critical readers of his poetry then and now—for social engagement. Personal neurosis here approaches ethical malfeasance. Implied by Lensing's discussion of the two poems, Stevens' "metaphysical" alibi for his poetic musings and his reliance on "the earth only" for his visionary desideratum amount to a "consolation" for an otherwise impoverished social life that verges on "tragedy," and which in fact "came to define [his] life and work . . ." (Lensing 3).

As one can see, Lensing's critical focus tends to turn the two Stevens poems in question into a biographically determinable agon. Yet must we read or frame them for their biographical yield? Put differently, once we (think we) know a poem's biographical scene of writing, can we then *un*-know it, thus getting the poem itself, rather than the writer's situation when writing it, into relation to our own personal situations? Lensing himself finds both poems fraught with a more widely meaningful, ethical tension, no matter its evincing an all-too-human Stevens. In contrast, Mark Halliday, no Stevens apologist to say the least, goes the extra mile of biographical reductionism. He frames both Stevens' poems and his life as evidence for judging him "a man with a profound concern for the intactness of his self, in conjunction with a profound aversion to the demands of interpersonal relations."[2]

Yet as regards a poet able to advocate how "The imperfect is our paradise" ("The Poems of Our Climate," *CPP* 179), Halliday's first indictment distorts Stevens' constantly pragmatic and so endlessly provisional concept of self.[3] An early poem like "The Place of the Solitaires" in *Harmonium*, for example, lauds a world of "perpetual undulation" (*CPP* 47). Nothing about one's experience can or should remain stable, neither love vis-à-vis its nuances, as catalogued, to cite only one example, in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," nor inclinations toward imperial notions of self. On the contrary, for Stevens such views of "self" continually become reducible to temporary, childlike illusions à la "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." The same holds true for his later poems. David La Guardia notes how they too resist complacent notions of selfhood.[4] This is so even when Stevens appears to entertain private matters such as "the particulars of his own heritage"; as La Guardia argues, through ruminations of this kind "Stevens releases newer selves snarling for discovery in the form of poems as acts of self-creation" (La Guardia 159).

Halliday's second charge, that "the interpersonal troubled Stevens much more than the various vicissitudes of his imaginative experience of nature," again would consign his poetry to self-absorbed (read: morally selfish) and "escapist" fare (Halliday 143). As with "Yellow Afternoon," for example, Stevens' poems more often than not represent women as muse-figures or worse rather than as persons per se. Yet however plausible at first glance,[5] this accusation fails to consider a no less plausible dialectical alternative. Halliday's ethical imperative ironically ends up doing to Stevens — typecasting him through a biographical reading of his poetic works — what he claims Stevens does to others. In contrast, Stevens himself arguably works precisely against this kind of ethical-biographical reductionism. In "Cuisine Bourgeois," also from *Parts of a World*, the speaker finds himself in a modern world — "These days of disinheritance" — in which his bourgeois peers "feast / On human heads" (*CPP* 209). The meaning seems clear enough: bourgeois ideology prompts people to try wholly to consume each other's words, ideas and even self-identity. In particular, Stevens' contemporaries devour *themselves* by presuming to *know* each other: "Are the men eating reflections of themselves?" Besides keeping this judgment suspended (in the form of a question), he tries to resist that tendency by conjuring a past world when people and nature remained not quite

known, "like the season when, after summer, / It is summer and it is not." People in the modern world have no place for such liminal nuances. They reject past precedents for them — inheritances — in effect declaring themselves exceptions to past modes of regarding others.

Moderns, in short, adopt a predatory, epistemic stance that the Stevens persona caustically refers to in cannibalistic terms: as "this present, this science, this unrecognized, / This outpost, this douce, this dumb, this dead," wherein one works to know others the better to take them for so much "bitter meat." One can recast Stevens' vision in "Yellow Afternoon" along similar lines. Unlike his "bourgeois" peers, there he feels himself connected to everyone through "the earth," with this last reference figuratively linked to *humus*, or what finally grounds the *human*. Such a vision requires a *self-disciplined* quest for a half-knowledge of things, so to speak. The speaker of "Cuisine Bourgeois" quite literally applies this ethic to himself when extolling the example of "words [that] are written, though not yet said." The goal is to hold off the hallucination of thinking to know things with finality. If the Stevens speaker in "Yellow Afternoon" has discovered that he has no one else with whom to share this visionary desideratum, he can yet formulate that goal in "Cuisine Bourgeois" as a counter-ideal to the totalizing savoir-faire dominating his contemporary social environment.

For that matter, the woman in "Yellow Afternoon" might very well instance someone with whom he once felt he could share the same ethical resolution: to confront everything and everyone apart from himself *as* other — as *not* always already known. As I have noted, the "But" after the dash suggests that the actual woman couldn't sustain this ideal. On the other hand, appearing to him as part ("a face") of a world he prefers, the feminine figure with whom he remains intimate ("close") could instead represent her *real* former self. Something about her, ethically speaking, transcends her empirical identity. Just as important, she simultaneously turns *him* into someone like that to her. She thereby comes to figure someone, or more accurately some *other*, with whom he can share a more intimate kind of social vision ("close to a face / Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks") than conventional self-other relations of people in his modern world allow for.

A prototypical poem in Stevens' canon, "Yellow Afternoon" thus traces a kind of Kierkegaardian movement: from an utterly particular, aesthetic encounter with someone (the moment when "— she caught his breath —"), to an intimate relation with an indefinite yet distinctively felt mysterious self. In the first instance, readers of "Yellow Afternoon" can access the *particularity* of the "woman" only by means of a reflective, analogical act. The experience remains private to and for the speaker alone: *that* specific woman made him speechless — even to the point of forcing him to indulge the clichéd expression, "she caught his breath." Each of us may well have encountered the harmonious stun of an other; but this analogue breaks down before the stubborn, phenomenological fact that something about that experience with a particular other remains ours alone forever.

In contrast, readers can grasp the expressive parts ("a face") of an anonymous self, but in the immediate way that the poem metaphorically figures an indefinite

"face . . . that looks at one and speaks." That "face," as it were, could just as easily refer to any person's bottom-line self, even "Stevens" as incarnated in the present poem, which any one of us might come upon and communicate to others in more or less direct fashion. The poem illustrates an ethical act in the way it turns the "dark" or private domain in which one perceptually experiences the particularity of some event into a "universal" or publicly accessible, *i.e.*, a *human*, experience.[6] Early Stevens might have resisted such a conversion, at least preferring to hold onto the memory of aesthetic particularity.[7] This is how he frames Susannah's disaffection from the Elders' debased ethical gaze in his very early poem "Peter Quince at the Clavier": "The body dies; the body's beauty lives" (*CPP* 74). This all but Platonic aphorism comes down to the poet-speaker's futile, and yet for precisely that reason also beautiful, wish to find the particular experience of sensual inwardness — Susannah's moment of autoerotic bathing — repeatable.

One can still claim, of course, that the later "Yellow Afternoon" holds out for the same aesthetic option. As in a "yellow," sun-bright moment, for instance, private pleasures as with the woman-cum-earth elicit a sensory-sensual vision that initially blinds one to its temporary status. The persona's "afternoon" assignation indeed comes to resemble "the fatal unity of war," but in the sense that wars perforce end up instigating transient fictions of community. In short, his intimate experience finally fails to mean for him in any meaningful sense, even as the (poetic) record or residue of its demise inexplicably ("Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks") endures.

Put another way, "Yellow Afternoon" tracks the transformation of an otherwise passing or contingent autobiographical experience, namely of *that* beautiful "woman" who appeared exactly at *that* moment in the persona's life, into an enduring Beauty made publicly accessible, as the poem's bright title would appear to underscore. Yet insofar as this very accessibility works to eclipse its particular empirical (and private) source, mustn't the poem's "beautiful" transformation of it fade as well, and in particular for the poet who is best of all placed to register that metamorphosis? After all, Stevens had already once remarked how in poetry "the disclosure of the individuality of the poet" is "unlikely . . . ever visible as plainly to anyone as to the poet himself" ("The Irrational Element of Poetry," *CPP* 783). What we perhaps need further to emphasize is how his poem's beauty at some point also in fact dies, having become for him a once only event, and for that reason all more exquisitely beautiful.

-2-

In a critical essay that threatens to make speculative criticism and theorizing interesting again, Jon Kertzer associates Stevens' poetry as a whole with his hunt for "literary singularity." If, however, aesthetic deixis concerns grasping the utter particularity of things including of a poetic work, this turns out impossible to sustain, first of all because any "text is intelligible through its relation to other texts." Critical

explication instantly situates all texts in wider contexts of meaning, such as occurs when simply broaching the ethical issue of Stevens' poetry. Semiotic expansion, the provenance of criticism, by definition denies the notion of any first-and-onliest experience of a literary work or else of what it purports to represent. As Kertzer notes, we readers "require some analogy to express a poetic individuality that precedes any analogy and will be falsified by it" (Kertzer 213). He then maintains that Stevens pursues both extremes to the point where they often *appear* extreme and all but negate themselves. On one hand, he can muse the particularistic goal of "the the" in "The Man on the Dump" (Kertzer 214); in the late poem "The Course of the Particular," he pursues such particularity until its "cry concerns no one at all" (*CPP* 460) or becomes entirely nullified. On the other hand, Stevens also expresses the urge for finding a "totality" of meaning (210). In those cases, too, a self-contradiction arises, for even as it endows significance to the parts it contains, that totality frames them as existing pro tem, in other words primarily for the "world" to which they contribute. Once again parts threaten to disappear *as* parts, at the same time thereby diminishing the value of the whole.

If the two options appear patently at odds, Kertzer thinks Stevens nonetheless keeps trying to retain both aesthetic particularity and ethical scope as non-contradictory goals (218). In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for example, Stevens surmises that the poet "tries by a peculiar speech to speak / The peculiar potency of the general" (*CPP* II.ix 343). Kertzer proceeds to connect this side of Stevens' vision with Emmanuel Levinas's notion of how each person's singularity requires one's becoming ethically beholden to others (227). Just as Stevens' passion for the radically particular experience nevertheless always becomes pulled toward modes of understanding that constantly qualify it, so Levinas's ethical notion of existential singularity paradoxically mandates responsibility to others. For both Levinas and Stevens, in other words, the absolute particularity of each person ultimately inaugurates a "challenge from the world beyond the self that forever implicates the self" (233).

At a more general level than the historical specificity anchoring Longenbach and Brogan's apologias of Stevens' difficult sociality, Kertzer thus also sees a more communal-oriented Stevens than first meets the critical reader's eye. For Kertzer, this position is explicitly manifest in the post-World War II poem "Credences of Summer," which pointedly embraces the desideratum of a radically singular, visionary moment:

> Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
> Burn everything not part of it to ash. (*CPP* 322)

Regardless of that "singular" charge, Kertzer claims, "the 'resounding cry' expressed . . . in 'Credences of Summer' urges us to 'share the day.' It not only startles the mind into awareness of its own precious existence, but makes it 'aware of division . . . [a] s that of a personage in a multitude'" (Kertzer 233).

Yet this mode of reconstructing the ethical value of Stevens' works precariously depends on an uncertainty of self such as predicated by the featureless other evoked in "Yellow Afternoon." There the particular woman turns into a figure akin to a speaking void: an entirely inexpressive "face" that somehow still sees and speaks. This turn lends an uncanny twist to any insistence on the poem's Levinas-like ethical scene of one's *facing* an other as such. On the contrary, the loss of familiarity of the Stevens speaker with that other surely portends the dissolution of any recognizable ethical bond between them. Moreover, for a self-conscious poet like Stevens—the firecat in the inaugural *Harmonium* poem, "Earthy Anecdote," for instance, stands for a figure blocking readers from direct access to his poems' inner recesses—the encounter with a blank, metamorphosed other not implausibly comes to constitute a trope for his preferred relation to any given reader of his poem(s). That is, resistant to commonplace modes of reading, the Stevens poem, already impersonally expressive, moves toward becoming radically enigmatic. In effect, "Yellow Afternoon" exemplifies a poetic practice primed to undermine the most commonly assumed ethical criterion governing social discourses at large: a pragmatically secured self-other relation.

What kind of reading *would* the Stevens poem allow for, then, if it constitutionally *dis*allows any direct intercourse between the authorial "personage" and the "multitude" of the poem's potential readers? Its preemptive if indirectly inscribed resistance to reading outlaws ahead of time any biographical-interpretive frame by which, for example, one might want to claim how self-other relations consistently posed a problem for him.[8] As if constituting one of the poem's main points, it also alienates other efforts not only to determine its particular source in Stevens' personal life (anyway impossible to know for certain), but also to fix its social-historical meaning for him, as when one reads "Yellow Afternoon" for his political response to the outbreak of World War II. Nor can one assume that the poem subliminally resists the reader's inquisitive gaze regarding Stevens' empirical identity in order for him to realize (read: fantasize) his work's aesthetic singularity, if only during the time of composition. After all, his staged scene of reading in "Yellow Afternoon" results in the dissipation of his encounter with *the* woman.

Nonetheless, a certain autobiographical residue clings to Stevens' very act of resistance, despite or even *because* of its cloaked, semiotic status. Of course, only in the most general sense might one term Wallace Stevens' poetry at all autobiographical. A notoriously private person, he hardly set the precedent for the "confessional" kinds of poetry that have dominated the American literary scene since his death.[9] To be sure, written utterances of any kind unavoidably express the writer's affective position on this or that subject. Yet this truism scarcely presses us to designate Stevens as a distinctively autobiographical poet. Quite the contrary, judged against conventional notions of autobiographical writing, Stevens' poetry goes out of its way to ambiguate references to persons whose actuality stands in question. Is "Ramon Fernandez" in "The Idea of Order at Key West" the personal acquaintance that Stevens treats him as being there? Like the "woman" in "Yellow Afternoon," his wife and other events in his private life at best appear—always

only at a guess — by well-disguised indirection. Ditto Stevens' allusions to foreign places that he never in fact visited, for example "Egypt" in "The Cuban Doctor" or Switzerland in "The Doctor of Geneva" from *Harmonium*.[10] One might wish to submit "The Comedian as the Letter C" as an exception to such pseudo-autobiographical practices.[11] Yet other than as an obscure allegory of Stevens' particular poetic career, hence as potential biographical information, readers have to strain to gauge the immediate relevance of the protagonist Crispin's journeys to his or their own life-experiences.[12] Longenbach accordingly identifies the poem's genre as a specialized, self-conscious literary quest, an "imaginative voyaging in the tradition of Shelley's 'Alastor' and Yeats's 'The Wandering of Oisin,'" and so ends up hedging its autobiographical implications: "Stevens is not exactly Crispin . . ." (Longenbach 91, 94).

Like "Crispin," third-person allusions in Stevens' poems that might plausibly refer to himself also remain stubbornly ambiguous. Only *perhaps* can one read the eponymous, visionary speaker in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" as Stevens referring to his own unexpressed, imaginative highs.[13] The same questionable self-reference applies to the "he" in "Yellow Afternoon." Likewise, Stevens' "ephebe" figures in two later poems, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," only loosely resemble him, since at the time of composing them he obviously was neither a young man nor an apprentice poet. The same genre-conundrum obtains even in instances where a first-person perspective dominates the poem. The speaker's bizarre posturing (placing a jar on a Tennessee hill) in the well-known "Anecdote of the Jar," for example, blocks our taking him for Stevens per se. The poem requests a symbolic — a "poetic" — as opposed to an "autobiographical" reading. Similarly, the bird's self-evident pluri-symbolic significance in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (*e.g.*, "But I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know") turns the self-referential "I" into an indeterminate persona (*CPP* 75–76). At best, the "I" there represents the voice and subject of Stevens only in an abstract and notably anonymous sense. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" just doesn't come across as his rumination about some actual blackbirds that he saw while walking to work one day on a New York City street or on Farmington Avenue in Hartford.

Critically speaking, in all of these examples the putative "autobiographical" references can't escape the aesthetic limitations of the reader's mediating, deductive surmise. That is, like George Lensing, one must first impose a critical-biographical template onto a given Stevens poem, whether to read it as primarily autobiographical or to cull its significance vis-à-vis Stevens' life and/or times. Lensing explicitly argues, for instance, that along with "Yellow Afternoon" and the earlier "Red Loves Kit" (1924), the later poem "World Without Peculiarity" (1948) from the 1950 collection *The Auroras of Autumn* shows Stevens "speak[ing] more openly about himself and his marriage" than he does in his other poems. "World Without Peculiarity" can even stand for a revision of the earthy ethos of "Yellow Afternoon":

The day is great and strong —
But his father was strong, that lies now
In the poverty of dirt.
* * *
. . . . what his mother was returns and cries on his breast.
* * *
. . . . she that he loved turns cold at his light touch.

What good is it that the earth is justified,
That it is complete, that it is an end,
That in itself it is enough?

It is the earth itself that is humanity . . .
He is the inhuman son and she,
She is the fateful mother, whom he does not know.
* * *
. . . . sometimes,
He, too, is human and difference disappears

And the poverty of dirt, the thing upon his breast,
The hating woman, the meaningless place,
Become a single being, sure and true. (*CPP* 388)

Lensing holds that "World Without Peculiarity" specifically refers to Stevens' dead father and mother as well as to his wife — "The hating woman" — in "terse and unspecified" terms (Lensing 300). The poem's thematic gist also again supposedly lies in its biographical context. For example, just as he does in "Yellow Afternoon" Stevens here "momentarily" adopts the perspective of "earth." Via "the poverty of dirt," he imagines himself one with his father, from whom he had been estranged at the time of the elder's death years earlier. In that way, Stevens here effects a "psychic reconciliation among the broken relations of his family," and more comprehensively "all the peculiar pieces of [Stevens'] broken life" (Lensing 301). Other critics of "World without Peculiarity" arrive at similar conclusions about its comprehensive take on human experience, although often skirting the poem's autobiographical significance as such. While he doesn't address this particular poem, B. J. Leggett, for example, would no doubt regard Stevens' final vision in it as synonymous with the trajectory of other late Stevens poems. These concern "cosmic imagination [as] the central component of a project to imagine a reality paradoxically independent of the imagination" (*Final Fiction* 140). For Leggett, poems like "Lebensweisheitspielerei" and "The Rock" move into the visionary precincts of the "independent" cosmic Real; or the same thing, they show Stevens assuming a cosmic perspective that exposes "the stale grandeur of annihilation" ("Lebensweisheitspielerei," *CPP* 430), which is to say, those persons and on occasion even himself who tiresomely cling to a clichéd angst.

Yet if only in theory, inching toward the Real "dirt" behind his formerly affirmative, earthy visions tends to negate rather than support the possibility of his writing autobiographical poems. Taking a "cosmic" perspective, we all perforce appear "fantastic" figurations ("The Rock" 445) within the mass. At bottom, that is, we all exist "*without* peculiarity." Each of us comes unconsciously to stand for a disappearing part in "a world" where we never possess any unique purpose or purchase or "peculiar" identity. To be sure, this vision need not always run to despair for Stevens. In certain moments when "difference disappears," he can accept becoming a "single being" with others and everything earthly, "sure and true." Still, what kind of autobiographical reflection can withstand a thesis predicated on the disappearance of any communicable self-identity? Moreover, "World Without Peculiarity" could be said to acknowledge Stevens' falling back into a "world without peculiarity" in the sense that, *like others, he tends to want the familiar,* i.e., *the familial*, the better, precisely, *to evade the Real*. Paradoxically, he here confesses to himself his own all-too-human tendency to lean on familiar, conventional kinds of autobiographical selfhood, such as the lineage of family (his father, mother and wife), precisely to deny an increasingly obtrusive Real that would negate it.

He eventually appears to abandon this familial option, however, such as in canto XIII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" where he suggests how transforming "self" into an anonymous organ of perception means to forgo not only ego-identity but also lingering, symbolic (*e.g.*, familial) substitutes for it (*CPP* 404–5). Furthermore, he regards himself an ephebe unlike his designation of it in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for in the "New Haven" poem he underscores how his poetic charge hereafter must concern his adherence to a poetics of the Real. As such, he must eschew what he terms the "too-constant warmth" (or security) by which one unthinkingly if sometimes also poetically experiences the commonplace world most of us inhabit most of the time. For Stevens, that world now stands irredeemably lost. He can no longer assume the bravura persona typical of his *Harmonium* poems: a self who could think to revise his vision of life by deploying poetry, as in poems like "Sunday Morning" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," to disclose and thereby celebrate that world's fresh, absurd, exquisite phenomena. The Stevens of "World Without Peculiarity" and "Lebensweisheitspielerei" also vacates another social-poetic justification of modernist ideology: writing poetry to sabotage and transcend surrounding social environments, all of them dependent on a variety of "rotted" myths and "names" for the so-called reality one lives ("The Man with the Blue Guitar," *CPP* XXXII 150).

By the time of "World Without Peculiarity," even an updated Romantic myth of spiritual-autobiographical growth has become untenable for him. For the mid-career Stevens, such growth primarily consists in his vocational passion to revise his life in pursuit of "the first idea." As recently as the 1942 "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "false" consciousness had meant one's encountering things through one or another worn-out myth. Spiritual growth would therefore require one to transcend them toward their "first idea," a vocational charge akin to Emerson's famous call to Americans to "enjoy an original relation to the universe."[14] A similar redemptive

gambit applies to Stevens' very late "review" poems like "The Planet on the Table," "As You Leave the Room," and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." James Olney claims that they revise Stevens' former poetic moments-cum-poems or "parts" into a final, harmonious whole: "Just as the planet on the table . . . represents the world in miniature, so the volume of poems represents the poet's oeuvre, and this single poem ['Planet'] contains in itself, as does an autobiography, the whole of which it is a part" ("Mirror on the Wall" 647). Stevens' late poems, that is, re-imbue his past "personal" parts with "first idea" significance, and not just for himself but for the poems' readers as well. Like Eliot and Yeats near the end of their careers, Stevens thus turns "the personal into the universal—the effect of great poetry and great autobiography" (Olney 645).

Unlike Mark Halliday, Olney clearly has no ethical misgivings about Stevens' focus on self. Nonetheless, many of his late poems tamper with the "universal" story synonymous with Romantic and other spiritual-autobiographical narratives: the summation of one's life anchored by "harmonious" encounters of self with self, with nature, or with God. "Lebensweisheitspielerei" arguably thematizes this very deviation from such precedents: "The proud and the strong / Have departed. / Those that are left"—such as himself—"are the unaccomplished." At best what remains for Stevens to contemplate, philosophically speaking, comes down to "the plain sense of things" wholly in the present. Yet when viewed through the immanent aura of what Leggett terms "cosmic imagination," those things lack substantial meaning. They stand for nothing: more precisely, a no-thing quite different from the zero-something that lurks behind Stevens' aesthetic desideratum of "the nothing that *is*" (my emphasis) in his well-known early poem, "The Snow Man" (*CPP* 8). In fact, Stevens' encounter with the "Rock" has less to do with some *thing* synonymous with a vitalistic, "cosmic" magnitude, than with a stark, unsensational, spare, non-anthropomorphic something. This insignificant thing resembles the Lacanian *objet petit à* that, eluding the Symbolic register, raises the specter of a meaningless Real—not unlike "the [featureless] face" in "Yellow Afternoon."[15] The Stevens Real a.k.a. "The Rock" thus comes down to an *it* possessing the attribute that his persona in "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit" wishes any "god" might possess —that is, "If there *must* be a god in the house" (*Transport to Summer*, 1947, *CPP* 288; my emphasis).

Just so, even when one reads "The Planet on the Table" to refer to his own past poems, one cannot help but notice his simultaneous reduction of self-agency to non-human status: "Ariel was glad he had written his poems" (*CPP* 450). "Ariel," of course, explicitly alludes to Shakespeare's active, essentially genderless sprite in what many take to be *his* valedictory literary work. Here, however, the allusion not only serves as a trope of the poet's feeling himself near to finishing his artistic career, but more important also of himself as a fey poetic figure in effect having erased the biographical Stevens per se—the stolid presence of a notably stout, physical man.[16] Moreover, the poem's speaker would reduce his former poems to their "poverty of . . . words," and/or to mere fragments "of something [once] seen that he liked." In that sense, "he" as their poet envisages his former poems as non-

coalescing "parts of a world," all as if apprehended in the moment of their complete disappearance—"It was not important that they survive"—into "the planet of which they were a part."

One can surely read such evidence to signify how Stevens increasingly feels himself but an anonymous part of a whole defined by intermittent apparitions of the Real. He turns into more a blank, individuated entity than an identifiable person, or at best into a someone whose former sense of self-fullness has become thin to the bone. In the poem "As You Leave the Room," Stevens' persona addresses himself as "*You*" (his emphasis), but also stages himself turning into an alienated "skeleton" self to himself (*CPP* 597–98). This change comes about not merely because of old age or sickness, no doubt the plausible biographical explanation. Rather, he also now regards his past self as having worked to deny the "Rock" except as a pretext for continually imagining it on human terms. He sees how he then felt able through language to reconfigure the out-there world as if his verbal acts were more real than that world. Even back then, then, he was, "a disbeliever in reality." Now that he apprehends himself as but a transitory "Part of [that] major reality," the fundamental question necessarily arises: had he ever really lived, and would it matter if he did or didn't? Was *he* unreal? Worse, the environment that he once thought to revise through his poetic works—for example as in the early "Domination of Black" with its poetic *mise en scène* of a fearsome, swirling-leaves-like cosmos that yet spawns phenomenal via verbal largesse—now requires him to deny his particular sense of himself as such.

What can even a cosmic out-there mean *sans* that sense of self? What "world" is left except one that, in both senses of the verb, *leaves* him alone? In short, the act of perceiving himself and others as "parts of a world" from the point of view of some cosmic Real itself lacks substance. Unlike the past when Stevens could brood with aesthetic élan and a paradoxically desired existential certainty about "an old chaos of the sun" (*CPP* 56), now the brute particularity of himself and others gets lost and forfeits any secular version of a fortunate fall. Then he could still believe that, that "chaos" notwithstanding, at least he and everyone could experience the world via the "first idea." To be sure, the later Stevens can still recollect inspired, harmonious unions with that world. In "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," he terms such moments "the intensest rendezvous" of imagination and world. They occurred "Out of all the indifferences" (*CPP* 444), in other words, distinct from all those times—again, most of the time for most of us—when the "first idea" never happens. Only peak poetic moments could turn parts "into one thing" where "we forget each other and ourselves."

Stevens' version of Wordsworth's "spots of time," however, lack redemptive power, both because one cannot sustain them, and especially since they perforce appear as if repeatable, which always defines the problem in translating the aesthetically particular into the ethically general. That repetition, surely all the more noticeable the longer one lives, helps explain Stevens' late disenchantment with Whitman's vision of life in "Song of Myself": "not [as] chaos or death . . . it is form and union and plan . . . it is eternal life . . . it is happiness" (1855, Sect. 50). Stevens

finally cannot abide this vision and the ongoing union between self and world that it endorses: "It seems to me . . . that Whitman is disintegrating as the world, of which he made himself a part, disintegrates" (*Letters of Wallace Stevens* 1955, 963). As already suggested, that "world" makes the particular experiences of past personal events, the very stuff of autobiographical writing, appear insubstantial: "And yet nothing has been changed except what is / Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all" ("As You Leave the Room"). Stevens' visionary paradigm, to state the matter bluntly, makes *him seem to himself* "less and less human."

That entirely ephemeral sense of selfhood and world most famously characterizes the first part of his poem "The Rock." His reference to "the cure of the ground" for this self-malaise at first looks to be consonant with what a poet like Wordsworth had set the poetic-autobiographical precedent for in recovering past "splendors in the grass," or, in Stevens' idiom, in finding the cure of/by "the earth." As I have already suggested, Stevens lacks Romantic spiritual-autobiographical faith. "Earth" to him eventually precludes the ability simply to rely on Nature, God, or on some other safe haven to which one might continually return to overcome the hard truth, as he had written in "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," of how "the human is the alien." So if it at all figures in his writing, the Stevens autobiographical self lacks any "ground"; in turn, any so-called "cure" for spiritual alienation must somehow acknowledge that lack. Put another way, by regarding himself through the lens of the Real, he becomes *its* "supreme fiction." If anything, poems like "World Without Peculiarity" through "The Rock" and later trace autobiographical impulses, which each time become aborted by the recognition of the final impossibility of autobiographical self-reference.

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And yet, with Stevens' poetry an "and yet, and yet" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" I, 397) prevents any final shutting down of the autobiographical option, at least—quite literally—in theory. First of all, given its disintegrating aspect, one cannot *conceptualize* the Rock-bottom stuff, the so-called Real, ahead of time. By Stevens' own lights, "the absence of imagination / Had itself to be imagined" ("The Plain Sense of Things," *CPP* 428). This fact exposes the faux despair, the ironic send-up, which more accurately defines the speaker's position in "Lebensweisheitspielerei." Second, then, one can at most only ever be constantly in the process of coming upon and internalizing "the Rock." Encounters with Stevens' version of the Real comprise discrete projects. They require not so much one's will as a willingness to open up to their (possible) occurrence. Hence they can transpire only from one act of poetic composition to the next, each one skirting self-extinction, and so together consisting of parts that *remain* parts of Stevens' envisioned world. For him, such projects also inevitably lead to an imagined moment of *self*-estrangement, *self*-de-humanization, and, in accord with his collision with the Real, imminent *self*-disintegration. And all of this happens through the lens of a unique mode of autobiographical as opposed to aesthetic singularity. That is, one cannot share this

moment, since for him to articulate it would necessarily require him in some way to conceptualize it and thus negate his very act of coming upon the Real.

The poem "Prologues to What Is Possible" (1952; *CPP* 437–39) exemplifies just this process. As if focusing on his past and present compositional acts, Stevens here sketches how they originate from his inward sense of them. They first occur as happy departures from the routine: in "an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea." His act of imagination is solitary, since it takes place precisely over against the quotidian demands and definitions of reality associated with others. On the other hand, the "rowers" rowing the "boat"—the poem as vehicle—stand for his sense of writing within a literary tradition. That is, he writes his poem(s) in relation to past poets ("rowers") whose works (and their signature tropes) simultaneously impinge on and guide his acts of composition. In effect, these past figures offer him a "sure" means to realize his present poetic effort. As such, no "anxiety of influence" intrudes on it. "The boat," he states, "was built of stones," that is, possesses the time-tested, honorific materials of past poems, but these now lack "weight," and so are "no longer heavy." Shed of their particular personal and historical contexts, they leave behind "only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin." Stevens can thus use these precedents originally, even as he still operates within their tradition: he "Did not pass like someone voyaging out and beyond the familiar."

And yet de-familiarization is exactly what he records as eventually happening when he composes these later poems. Writing them soon takes him beyond even "familiar" poetic company, leading him to feel as if he "traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable / Without any meaning." Referring to his own poetic process, Stevens in effect trumps his formerly poetic, *i.e.*, non-autobiographical, depiction of Hoon in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," where Hoon's inexpressible vision remains liable to the charge of Romantic inflation and even solipsism. No such charge obtains in "Prologues to What is Possible," for here Stevens steps into the void: he comes upon the Real as an experience that he must reluctantly concede escapes the symbolic-cum-poetic registers of meaning. At *this* point only, the "I" justifiably feels "Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none." Composing the poem has left him with an experience that "stirred his fear"; for he has encountered nothing less than the disappearance ("needing none") of his human—in the sense of empirical—self-identity.

What ethical move could possibly appear meaningful in this context? Sensing himself disappearing from himself by definition must occur solely in relation to himself. This situation may very well hark back to the enigmatic encounter previously cited in "Yellow Afternoon." Indeed, if the featureless yet expressive figure in that poem somehow represents Stevens' very conception of his poetry as he imagines readers *ought* to apprehend it—namely, minus his determinate, human intention—then why not extend "her" figurative significance to include his own imaginatively desired *entire* (dis)appearance before the reader a.k.a. others? The only embryonic disaffection from them in that earlier poem thus finds fruition in "Prologues to What is Possible," with his inscribed self-image now clearly engaging an altogether different kind of ethical issue than "right" relations between self and

others. Projecting *himself* as "a face / Without eyes or mouth," he regards his self as other to others. In short, it is as if he writes poems *to become* unknown to them. This disaffection notably results in a "possible" mode of autobiographical writing—*as* a prologue, so to speak—that, unlike conventional versions of the genre, denies *immediate* verbal-analogical appropriations by others.

In "Prologues," then, Stevens' imaginary self-staging finds him alone with an estranged sense of self:

> The object with which he was compared
> Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness
> of him extended
> Only a little way, and not beyond . . . (*CPP* 438)

Lensing thinks that Stevens here evinces a wish to overcome his solitary vision (Lensing 301). As if compensating for it, Stevens subsequently makes clear that he can always make new poetic use of this just discerned nether dimension of selfhood. His experience can add a new slant on things and self; consequently it can contribute to anyone's otherwise "rotted" sense of everyday reality, as in "The way some first thing coming into Northern trees / Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South." One part of the experience traced in "Prologues to What Is Possible" thus potentially has a happy, social yield, doubtless justified, at least aesthetically, by the enabling force of Stevens' poetic charge to articulate "the first idea." The experience "Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness," a "real" (meaning human) world that writer and readers alike presumably can share as new.

But the poem also drifts beyond this vocational pull toward "the first idea" when entertaining the possibility of what in another poem from *The Rock* volume, "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," he terms "A place to go to in his own direction" (*CPP* 435). His poetry, that is, contains the paradoxical desire for self-annulment as to its communicability to others. In that case, the late Stevens poem moves from sharable poetic expression, an aesthetically particular verbal thing always giving way to its general and thus communicable significance, back toward a radically contingent, autobiographical encounter with the Real. Persisted in, that kind of encounter would replace, as does the featureless "sea" or trope of the Real in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," the mountain-like ideal of any aesthetic "supreme fiction." The "poem" Stevens extols would lead him to

> be complete in an unexplained completion:
>
> The exact rock where his inexactness
> Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged . . . (*CPP* 435)

His final "view" of the poem has it standing for an effigy of self mimicking the Real, and so becoming harmonious with *it*, or arriving at a state of mind "Where he could lie and, / gazing at the sea, / Recognize his unique and solitary home."

If nothing else, poems like these evince an immanent theory of autobiographical writing that precludes not only social commentary, but also their serving as

substitute biographical information, especially given how the biographical project perpetrates for readers the illusion of being able to judge the subject in question. In contrast, Stevens' late poems work to nullify biographical modes of critique for their efforts to objectify the subject through linguistic representations, most often by proposing to know that self through generically reconstructed personal and historical formulations. At best, such criticism purports to gather more accurate, *i.e.*, objective, evidence, determined to explain, in Stevens' case particularly, what his consistently difficult poems *probably* mean. Venturing upon ethically questionable territory, namely the pretense or simply the wish to know the other entirely, this kind of critical approach at best allows for what Kierkegaard termed "approximation knowledge."

More important, quasi-autobiographical readings of Stevens' poems miss the "solitary" autobiographical imperative dictated by the persona evoked in his late poems. In the end, he too can only allude to his end-position; at best he can lead up to it but never instantiate it in and through poetic utterances. Just at the moment when it becomes possible for Stevens to conceive an autobiographical mode of writing, it turns out impossible to execute. Conversely, we can all still share the delight of a late Stevens poem perceived as if "revolving . . . in crystal" ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," III.x 351), which is to say, ideally according to *our* "first idea" of it. But the former point matters most. In his later poems, we continually run across Stevens having come to recognize how, notwithstanding his verbal dexterity, his words have begun to erode into no more than a "cry [that] concerns no one at all." This realization inevitably concerns himself alone as, at last, a truly autobiographical peculiarity, leaving in its wake only inchoate intimations of a peculiar autobiographer.

That vision of autobiographical peculiarity redefines the vocational desideratum of literary singularity that Stevens once searched for only in aesthetic terms. To be sure, one can still recontextualize it vis-à-vis his biographical situation, for example as due to his self-imposed isolation, or his congenital distaste for interpersonal intimacies, or more simply to an old-age sense of loneliness.[17] To adopt such a position, however, would be egregiously to miss what he experiences alone at this late juncture *in his vocational career*: the first because now also always about to become the hardest or *last* "idea" of self. The latter becomes freeze-framed, as it were, in a crystalline, poetic language caught disappearing from itself, as in the image of "A glass aswarm with things going as far as they can" ("Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," *CPP* 440). It is an idea to be sought, against his or anyone's instinctive will not to seek it, and so constitutes a newly conceived ethical charge, private to him and thus communicable to others only in the most indirect terms. In *that* sense, that idea might appear to him almost inhuman and socially callous to others, just as from this later perspective Stevens' notion of the "supreme fiction," of one's believing in a life-fiction that one knows to be a fiction,[18] perforce seems absurdly useless. Yet for that very reason [*sic*], it leads one to *choose* and not just assume the status of being almost human.

Among other things, this formulation of his late scene of writing would demur at Denis Donoghue's assertion that Stevens substituted a faith in "secular humanism" for a true religious stance: "Stevens wanted a religion without belief or practice; he wanted to rid himself of the doctrines while enjoying a trace of them in his sensibility . . ." (*Adam's Curse* 100). While Donoghue acknowledges that Stevens' "supreme fiction" consists of more than epistemological *spielerei*, he nonetheless thinks it requires little to no spiritual effort: "The main problem with Stevens's procedures is that he seems to achieve his ends at little cost." That "seems" seems necessary to retain when making such a judgment, since one could just as easily argue that the function of religious symbologies [*sic*] is to secure social consensus for a particular belief-system so that, above all, one is never alone believing in it. In Stevens' terms, literary criticism itself would no doubt risk the same insofar as it consists of a fiction about a fiction (of a Stevens poem, for instance), but a fiction that continually tends to resist its fictional status.

In baring the fiction as such of his own work along with that of institutionalized symbologies, Stevens asks himself to use fictions quite differently. His mean to become "prologues to what is possible": to encounter alone—and so, *pace* Donoghue and others, at great personal and social cost—a non-human and de-humanizing Real. In theory, this proleptic thesis conditions any Symbolic he might (want to) believe in, or that works for him as such at any given time in his life. The same argument applies to his putative deathbed conversion to Roman Catholicism, which constitutes one last mythology that he therefore redeems as much as and even more than vice-versa. Stevens' late poems promise a "religious" autobiography of a different kind: one in essence to be scripted by an anonymous self indistinguishably disguised to external observers in the buttoned-up figure of "Wallace Stevens."

Notes

1. *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, 216. All references to Stevens' poems will be from this text, hereafter cited by *CPP* followed by page number.

2. See Halliday, *Stevens and the Interpersonal*. Cf. James Olney's citation of Stevens' dismissive reaction to Robert Frost's work: that it "'is full (or said to be full) of humanity'" ("The Mirror on the Wall" 646).

3. David M. La Guardia makes this argument throughout *Advance on Chaos: The Sanctifying Imagination of Wallace Stevens*, 1983.

4. Cf. the often-quoted lines from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "From this the poem springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (*CPP* I.iv 332).

5. Halliday basically accuses Stevens of sexist and racist stereotyping, judgments for which one can find a sufficient amount of biographical evidence. Still, Halliday's criteria belong to a historically determinate, liberal-egalitarian ethos that constitutes the hegemon of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century academic community. From this point of view, one can only seek strained ways to excuse, for example, Stevens' earthy-cum-sexual depiction of the "negress" in "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" or in "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern." For that matter, who nowadays would excuse a "dead-

white-male" poet for entitling a poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," despite the fact that it upsets the pejorative connotation of such "decorations" by delivering gem-like koans in their stead?

6. Cf. Halliday on the woman in "Yellow Afternoon": "Undoubtedly Stevens is up to something metaphysical there . . . but I suggest that what we feel in those lines is a cryptic confession of a man's cowardly withdrawal from the woman back into the private dark of the self" (57).

7. The situation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet represents a good locus classicus of this first kind of experience. The instantaneity and particularity of their relation to each other in the play eludes the purview and understanding of others, most notably, of course, those representatives of the conventional ethical life, the lovers' two families. Yet even the lovers' friends and helpmates can only think — ethically — about preserving each of the two lovers' well-being. The play's very audience plays a similar role, given its twice distanced perspective on Romeo and Juliet by necessarily having to assume their fictionality as well. Still, this situation does not preclude the play's own ethical trajectory. *Romeo and Juliet*, that is, exposes the arbitrary nature and/or obtuse externality of society's ethical rules. In that sense, the felt inwardness of Romeo and Juliet's love for each other comes across as more ethical, as a more genuine self-other relation, than what passes for ethical truth in their social milieu. Yet their suicides also symbolize their inability to translate their particular relation into the social sphere — in short, to get married, which, as the play suggests, would result in their love's death no less than their (only) apparently accidental decisions to commit suicide. In that sense, another kind of ethical code appears, since the ethos of the two lovers would result in an untenable subjectivism vis-à-vis the social order. Such would define Captain Vere's correct but unpopular decision in Melville's *Billy Budd*, for instance.

8. In biographical terms, Stevens comes across as a person often difficult to get along with, let alone know in any intimate sense. See, for example, the Ivan Daugherty "Memorandum," introduced by his son and reproduced in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 32.1 (Spring 2007): 3–9.

9. To a certain extent, Halliday's aforementioned criticism of Stevens' evasion of "interpersonal relations" in his poetry stems from the post-Stevens Zeitgeist of American "confessional" poetry, spearheaded, for example, by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959).

10. Fredric Jameson argues that Stevens often uses exotic, Third-world "place-names" in his poetry to justify a bourgeois, touristic sensibility, and perhaps even an imperialist one ("Wallace Stevens," *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens* 183–84). One problem with Jameson's judgmental criticism lies in how even in an early *Harmonium* poem like "Nomad Exquisite," Stevens exposes the tourist sensibility as inadequate to his poetic charge.

11. "The Comedian as the Letter C" was one of the last poems written for inclusion in the first edition of *Harmonium* (1923). Helen Vendler terms the poem "veiled autobiography" and "semi-ironic confessional" pertaining to Stevens' efforts to come to terms with the world (*Extended Wings* 54). Many critics have read the poem as Stevens' statement forecasting his subsequent, almost decade-long withdrawal from the poetic scene.

12. Milton J. Bates discusses the "The Comedian as the Letter C" as essentially an autobiographical poem in his *A Mythology of Self* (117–26). No doubt the poem indulges certain conventional autobiographical references. Even Stevens' actual wife arguably makes a fleeting, cameo appearance in the poem as Crispin's "prismy blonde" muse. At that point, the poem, one might argue, at least in passing turns into a kind of private billet doux to Elsie as the inspirational source of this and his other *Harmonium* poems.

13. Bates, for example, considers the "regal figure" of Hoon to be "the one" protagonist in Stevens' early poems "least qualified by irony . . .". For Bates, such self-reference also inflects Stevens' later and supposedly more politically concerned poems of the 1930s: "Without a visit to Hoon in his palaz, one will not appreciate how Stevens' poems of the thirties, though they are not intimately autobiographical, might nevertheless be said to contain and discourse of himself alone" (*A Mythology of Self* 126).

14. Stevens may have explicitly formulated this goal fairly early in his career, even before its most expressive apogee in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." For example, one critic thinks this "idea" accounts for how "The Comedian as the Letter C" ends "Fadedly," suggesting that Crispin a.k.a. Stevens "experienced

a spiritual enlightment that prompted, at least for a time, the poet's renunciation of his art" (Leonora Woodman, *Wallace Stevens and the Hermetic Tradition* 155).

15. Slajov Žižek provides the following (anti-)definition of the Lacanian Real, which in essence is [*sic*] what remains beyond Symbolic codifications and/or their distorted efforts to define it: "The Real is an entity which must be constructed afterwards so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure." The Real also assumes the appearance of the non-thing or Lacan's *objet petit a*. Žižek cites Alfred Hitchock's use of MacGuffin as an example of this Lacanian category: it has no significance in itself, but is "a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire" and of making meaning (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 162, 163).

16. Cf. Eleanor Cook on one of Stevens' poems from *Harmonium*, "The Plot Against the Giant," which plays on his sense of physical self: Stevens "playfully signed himself the 'Giant' in some correspondence" (*Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* 39).

17. See Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years* 372–73.

18. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (189). Also cf. Stevens, *Letters*, #467, Dec. 8, 1942.

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