"I have not but I am and as I am, I am"

Home and Homelessness in the poems of Wallace Stevens

by

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Short Titles

CP: Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954).

L: Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

NA: Wallace Stevens, The necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

OP: Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

Abstract

There has been extensive study on Wallace Stevens as the poet of native American soil, whose poetry spans the "metropoles" of cold, theoretical New England and lush, imaginative Florida. A battered and chastened Crispin discovers in the face of nature's assault upon him, that "The soil is man's intelligence." There has also been extensive study on Wallace Stevens as bourgeois consumer and collector of paintings and art objects, most of which have been motivated Marxist readings that reaffirm Stevens' longstanding and seemingly unshakeable reputation as an "effete" and "dandy" poet. Frank Lentricchia's work "Ariel and the Police" shows us that for Stevens, "the road to transcendence lied in commodities," and Helen Vendler's book "Words Chosen out of Desire" shows us that the object for Stevens was a "temporal event" that took its final shape in "the music score of poetry." My thesis continues the work that Lentricchia and Vendler have started, continuing to look at domestic, interior places as well as local, intimate objects, particularly the miniature object. I argue that Stevens, unlike the tragic poet who is always trying to "empty out excess feeling," is a poet whose space seems always too big, who needs to feel enclosed, and whose poetry reflect this insularity. I take, home and homelessness as metaphors of center and centerless as well as understanding and obscurity.

Content

Introduction: Preliminary Minutiae

In his essay, "Three Academic Pieces," Wallace Stevens talks about the place of resemblance in metaphor. The objects that he chooses to illustrate his point are intimate, household objects, since they "most easily prove the existence" of resemblance:

> [O]ne's grandfather's high beaver hat, one's grandmother's hand-woven blankets. One may find intimations of immortality in an object on the mantelpiece; and these intimations are as real in the mind in which they occur as the mantelpiece itself. Even if they are only a part of an adult make-believe, the whole point is that the structure of reality because of the range of resemblances that it contains is measurably an adult make-believe. (NA, 113)

Stevens' prose pieces on poetics are often circuitous and confusing, and when we read his thoughts on Metaphor, what he says about "resemblance" often sounds very much like nostalgia for Edenic Unity. He says in the search for metaphor that he does not deal with identity, since "metaphor is the vanishing point of resemblance" (NA,110) Jacqueline Vaught Brogan describes quite ominously in her book "Stevens and Simile" that the metaphor is frightening because "such unity or "oneness" would be more than human speech...we would no longer have that "difference" that Derrida explains is requisite for the play of language: instead, we would have only "quiet.""[1] We should then reconsider Stevens' qualification that his poetry does not deal with "identities," since

[1] Jacqueline Vaught Brogan. Stevens And Simile: a Theory of Language. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986.)

Stevens' resemblances and metaphors are never final, less merging together to create "one," than to create infinite extensions, recreations and decreations of a thing. His poetry creates, as Vendler says, a temporal event out of the object, and then is discarded later (turned back again into identities) for the next play. Reality for Wallace Stevens was always highly fragmented, disordinate, and each poem or each metaphor is meant to reclaim and to build some sort of narrative and continuity for the discrete, single moment. It is not the object, but the "life lived within the object" that matters. And it is in fact the object's being discrete and separate, its identity, that Stevens depends on for his cycle of metaphor making, his decreation and then his metaphor makings again.

Stevens seeks resemblance, (for pleasure and delight) in a world that he knows is disparate, discrete and fragmented as well as constantly moving in flux. Poetry is the pursuit of a "center," which is fixed. This center is only very rarely achieved in Stevens' work, and when it is, it is discarded the moment it is attained. In describing this trend in Stevens' work, J. Hillis-Miller writes in his amazing essay "Wallace Stevens: Poetry of Being," that

> Each poem by itself, like the whole mass of them together, is a hesitant and uncertain movement toward a goal which is never reached....the broken, a partial nature of the poem, the way it is a piece of something larger, or is only an indirect and incomplete movement towards its object, something preliminary and unfinished."[2]

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[2] J. Hillis.Miller The Act of the Mind: Essays On the Poetry of Wallace Stevens. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965.), 143.

Things left unfinished mean that things never have closure and are always left tentative. One of Stevens' most beautiful and serene poems illustrate, at the end, the repulsion for its own serenity. In "The Poems of Our Climate," we enter into a world grounded in objects:

> Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
>
> Pink and white carnations. The light
>
> In the room more like a snowy air,
>
> Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
>
> At the end of winter when afternoons return. (CP, 193)

Here objects intersperse between the ordinary and the fantastical. The water is clear. The carnations are pink and white. This is acceptable enough. But the bowl, brilliant, and the light, "snowy air reflecting snow," stir magical effects and gesture towards the metaphysical, insinuate the possibility of a realm beyond what we know. These "gestures" flirt with prospects of the other-world, beyond or hidden within the "objective" world. Our thoughts rise, but the speaker drags us down:

> Pink and white carnations – one desires
>
> So much more than that. The day itself
>
> Is simplified: a bowl of white,

Cold, cold porcelain, low and round,

With nothing more than carnations there.

The speaker refuses to spend his energy and poetic powers on meditations on carnations and does not hope that they will transport him somewhere beyond his chants. He will not make these carnations "brilliant" by seeking an analogy for it, as he does for the snowy air. The speaker invokes again the pink and white carnations in the sixth line, not to use it as an object for rumination, but only to dramatize his turn away from it: "one desires so much more than that." Harshly, he demotes the "brilliant bowl" to "a bowl of white,/ cold, a cold porcelain, low and round." The bowl is no portal to another world, but plainly a vessel to hold flowers, and a stout, ignoble looking one at that. A reader of Stevens might at this time remember his famous 1914 poem "Anecdote of a Jar" and compare his treatment of that Jar with this bowl. In that poem, the Jar, placed upon a hill in Tennessee, extend and ramify the powers of its own artifice. The Jar becomes the celebrated Order that stands in opposition to nature, and is powerful enough to reign in nature's unhappy disorder:

It made the slovenly wildness

Surround that hill (CP, 76)

In "The Poems of our Climate," Stevens pretends in the beginning to steer his momentum towards a conclusion like the one in "Jar." But a mere shrug toward that direction takes him beyond the Jar, and extends the old schema between object and its environment, to

object, environment and the contemplative mind. When the mind enters the equation, nothing can satisfy it for long:

A world of clear water, brilliant –edged,

Still one would want more, one would need more,

More than a world of white and snowy scents.

III

There would still remain the never-resting mind,

So that one would want to escape, come back

To what had been so long composed.

The imperfect is our paradise.

The object is not enough for the restless mind and its desires are to "escape" from it in order to "come back" to see the old in new light. If the mind reaches a "center," which is the haven (where the world is gorgeous, "clear water, brilliant-edged") outside of flux, the mind will always want to leave haven for flux again.

Note that, in this bitterness, delight,

Since the imperfect is so hot in us,

Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

Delight is borne out of "flawed words and stubborn sounds," things not easily penetrated. The condition of facing something "flawed" and "stubborn," which also includes

'difficult,' 'obscure,' 'dense,' creates our inexhaustible wonders and desires. And it is because of the mind's taste for wonder that induces its search for center, and then to abandon that center afterwards.

I see Stevens' search for a center as a search for "home," and in this thesis I focus primarily on domestic spaces and objects. I never actually arrive home, however, for most of Stevens' poems are about "homelessness," the condition of being removed from the desired center. I talk about physical home as well as the mind "being at home." To understand is to be at home. To be unable to make head-or-tail of an Oklahoman fire-cat is not to be at home.

To read Stevens is always to feel one's mind being defied. Reading him this past year, I have come to learn what he means by a "never-resting mind" whose desire is for a "relentless contact," since for me, his poetry has often eluded my understanding and has taught me the importance of endurance and forbearance when faced with a difficult work. To steep oneself in his poetry is both to be lifted by the sublime music of his words, as well as endure the fury of not understanding, of seeing only half shapes, thinking only half thoughts. I have often found myself feeling "cast out" or expelled from the territory of his thinking and watched my own efforts in making an order for things collapse onto itself. It seems that Stevens is trying to cultivate in the reader, a sense of homelessness. His poetry is often described as "object-like" and impenetrable, and in this way can not be entirely permeated by the subjective and often, invasive intelligence.

Chapter 1: Storm of Secondary Things

Throughout his work, Stevens makes the connection between home and thinking. In "Imagination and Value," Stevens writes that "We live in the mind," (NA, 140) and in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," (CP, 524) the triumph of poetry that "suffice[s]" is the moment where dwelling and thinking fuse together. The type of thinking we are talking about is poetic thinking, a flight away from one's present state onto an "exquisite plane." Stevens never became the poet of the flesh. His poems rarely deal with dramatic conflict between people. Characters do not touch or talk to each other, and the only "sensual" contact manifests in removed observation. "Life is a matter of people," wrote Stevens, "but for me, life is a matter of places and this is the trouble." (OP, 156) His is the poetry of quiet observation, which for him was also a way of disciplining the mind: "accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking." Sometimes thinking seemed best if it happened in a corner:

> "In the evening went to Christ Church. Full litany – sweet and melodious and welcome. They should have dark corners there. Impossible to be religious in a pew. One should have a great nave, quiet lights, a remote voice, a soft choir and solitude. Near me was a doddering girl of, say, twenty – idiot eyes, spongy nose, shining cheeks. With her were two ladies – one not quite middle aged, and hungry respectable looking, the other elderly with the same look. All three wore home made bonnets. One sees the most painful people, wherever one goes. Human qualities, on an average, are fearful subjects for contemplation." (L, 86).

For Stevens, the corner is where one can "be religious." Gaston Bachelard, in his book "The Poetics of Space," writes that corners are places for hiding, and withdrawal, it is

> a symbol of solitude for the imagination... this purely physical contraction into oneself already bears the mark of a certain negativism....a corner that is "lived in" tends to reject and restrain, even to hide, life. The corner becomes the negation of the Universe."[3]

The "rejection of life" that Bachelard speaks of means for Stevens the rejection of people and of open space. People and open space seem always infinite, un-appropriable, too much for the young Stevens to think about: "I can't make head or tail of Life. Love is a fine thing, Art is a fine thing, Nature is a fine thing; but the average human mind and spirit are confusing beyond measure" (L, 86) One reads in his poetry about solids, shapes, lines – objects that have been meticulously and scrupulously rendered. Helen Vendler has pointed out that Stevens' work "exhibits a Roman strictness, exhibiting a "lineament," a "character" of earth. It delineates; it characterizes. It does not, in the Keatsian manner, enact; rather, it offers a map with zones and poles of experience marked out on the fluid continuum of perception and desire."[4]

I use the figure of a domestic room filled with personal objects as a metaphor to read Stevens' poetry, proposing that Stevens' pursuit of the center is also the pursuit of home. There has been extensive study of Wallace Stevens as the poet of native American soil, whose poetry spans the "metropoles" of cold, theoretical New England and lush,

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[3] Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, (Boston: Beacon Press, 19691964) 136-137
[4] Helen Vendler Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984) 38-39

imaginative Florida. A battered and chastened Crispin discovers in the face of nature's assault upon him, that "The soil is man's intelligence." However, I would like to argue that by closing in the spatial extension and retreating into a room, by changing "space" into a "place," we can study the same issues of flux, circularity, obscurity that run abound Stevens' body of work, only with more focus. It is then, important that we focus on spaces that have outlines and cutoffs. Bergson says it more elegantly in "Matter and Memory":

> "The more I narrow this horizon, the more the objects which it circumscribes space themselves out distinctly according to the greater or less ease with which my body can touch and move them. They send back, then, to my body, as would a mirror, its eventual influence; they take rank in an order corresponding to the growing or decreasing powers of my body. The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them."[5]

It seems that Stevens is always trying to fill up emptiness, spaces too large for him to occupy. Unlike the tragic poet who tries to dispose themselves of "excess feelings," to attain catharsis or to "empty out," Stevens' work is obsessed with enclosed spaces that create the identity or the ethos of those occupying it. Objects are meant to "resemble" each other, in order to create what he calls "adult make belief." Resemblances have powers both to transfigure and to sublimate two objects, making them "brilliant" in their relation and heightening our sense of the object. Resemblance can also resurrect and bring back the dead and the forgotten. The life of an object in our mind or the objects of

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[5] Henri Bergson and Nancy Margaret Paul. Matter And Memory. (London: G. Allen & co., ltd., 1911) 6-7

our obsessions require that we come back to it and to see it in "varying themes" and against varying connections. In the end, it seems that his intention is to renew our sense of things against deadening conceptualizations. In his common place book, Stevens had copied down the quote: "The purpose of life is to build a stage on which one is of some importance."[6] The purpose of life is to make sure that one is surrounded and enveloped by things and where the engagement is reciprocal. The "Jar in Tennessee" is *surrounded* by the hill and in this way orders the "sprawl" so that the wilderness "sprawl[s] around" with direction. His poem "Theory" is an even more explicit argument that we are made from the objects that we surround ourselves with:

I am what is around me.

Women understand this.

One is not duchess

A hundred yards from a carriage.

These, then are portraits:

A black vestibule;

A high bed sheltered by curtains.

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[6] Wallace Stevens and Milton J Bates, Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book : a Facsimile And Transcription (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press , 1989), 56.

These are merely instances. (CP, 86-87)

Stevens' obsessive desire is for the "center," which in its perfect final form is a place of immobility and fixity like that in "Final Soliloquies of an Interior Paramour." Once attained, however, this center becomes obsolete, and he, now centerless again, looks elsewhere for another center. Barbara Fischer in her brilliant book "Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous" makes note on the etymology of "Place": "Latin platea from Greek platia, a street," and finding in this a build in contradiction, the "antithetical senses of stasis and kinesis. Place may indicate a static site, a location or building. On the other hand, a place may be a passage constructed to facilitate movement: a street, gallery, or bridge built to transport things from here to there."[7] The place of center is both the place of triumphant fixedness as well as another point of departure.

In thinking about place, one inevitably reaches issues of "home" and "homelessness," and Stevens' poetry jumps between extremes of minds encountering unbearable and discordant realities, experiencing homelessness: "That we live in a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves," (CP, 383) as well as high romantic internalization of the world, finding a home everywhere: "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw/ Or heard or felt came not but from myself." (CP, 65) The in-between is perhaps more illustrative in showing that Stevens' preoccupation with

[7]Barbara Fischer, Wallace Stevens: the Intensest Rendezvous (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 109.

home is also the preoccupation with the mind being at home[8], the fantasy of mind dealing co-terminally with reality:

He, that one, wanted to think his way to life,

To be happy because people were thinking to be.

They had to think it to be. He wanted that,

To face the weather and be unable to tell

How much of it was light and how much thought" (CP, 257)

Here, thought is depicted as the thoroughfare and the vessel that one uses to enter into the place where "life" occurs.

Poetry is the aspiration, the act of striving to return to home, and in its final product gives the momentary feeling of "an order, a whole,/ A knowledge." Perfect poetry is that which is insular, protective and something that encloses and contains us:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room

In which we rest, and, for small reason, think

The world imagined is the ultimate good.

Within a single thing, a single shawl

Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a

Warmth,

[8] On Page 110, Barbara Fischer provides an enlightening summary of how the mind-place figure has appeared throughout literary history: "It appears in romantic landscapes of desire and despair, as in Shelly's Alastor, or as the paralyzed sea in The Ancient Mariner; it supplies the psychological dimension of Lear's blasted heath, Prospero's enchanted island…Henry James proposed that the incomparable Shakespearean unity of language, matter, and style in The Tempest had been forged for over twenty years in "the very home of his mind." The mind-place equation fathers the pathetic fallacy."

A light, a power, the miraculous influence. (CP, 524)

Stevens does not always write perfect poetry that attains what it aspires, here shown as fixity, the world stopping its revolution "except in crystal." (Notes) He is, as Harold Bloom has written, a disjunctive poet,[9] and his poetry usually depicts disunity, chaos, flux. However, it is significant for our purposes that Stevens chose to depict poetry's final "enough" as an event that occurs within a room. The room is self-contained and self-sufficient and acts as a safeguard against the sterilizing effect of too many ideas and beliefs outside its boundary. The room creates the sense of whole, and in this, the mind feels at peace.

However, between each belief, that is, between each attained center, is the absence of belief, and like a gypsy moving from home to home, the poet travels homeless in search for another center. This is shown in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" where Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl who "has lost the whole in which he was contained,/ Knows desire without an object of desire,/ all mind and violence and nothing felt" (358) Here, the loss of a center is depicted as the loss of "the whole in which he was contained," of a home that he possesses and that possesses and encases him. He is cast out; homelessness is the state of standing in a repelling and alienating obscurity and to "know[] desire without an object of desire" is to possess savage energy with no direction to point it to. It is 'sprawling,' not 'sprawling *around.*'

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[9]Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: the Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 120.

Home and homelessness are also metaphors that describe our experience when reading a poem by Stevens. "Man Carrying Thing" is perhaps the best poem in teaching us how to read him. Stevens argued that all poetry is also metapoetry and this poem is the most explicit enactment of that tension between poetry and its poetics. The first two lines of this poem is quoted by almost every Stevens critic who has written extensively on him:

The poem must resist the intelligence

Almost successfully.

What follows is "an illustration," the concrete portrayal of this claim:

The brune figure in winter evening resists

Identity. The thing he carries resists

The most necessitous sense.

We find the placement of the article "The" in front of "most necessitous sense" odd. The speaker tries surreptitiously to fit what is obviously *our* necessitous sense (our most pressing need to see the thing he carries) onto the obscure thing itself. The intelligence is invasive and clings obdurately onto the object, first disguising and embedding itself into the object, so that the object seems filled with the springy desire but decides in the end to resists its own impulses. When the object "resists" our attempt to court it, the speaker must "Accept them, then,/ as secondary." The mind must not trammel into an object, or destroy and tear it apart in order to understand it (as the "Man on the Dump" considers "piec[ing] the world apart"), but to instead, to inflect thought. To *swerve* away from thought in order to return to it, seeking at the second hour, only what is attainable. The

process is to let the intelligence perform its task while at the same time letting one's initial ignorance suspend. As the sea severs not only lands but also selves, the obscure object severs the mind into both knowing and unknowing. It is the condition of mind-at-home and a homeless-mind. To read Stevens' poetry is to see

Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow

Out of a storm we must endure all night,

Out of a storm of secondary things)

If for F. Scott Fitzgerald, the mark of intelligence is to be able to hold two contradictory ideas in the mind and still be able to function, then for Stevens, the mark of the intelligent man is at best, the willful and disciplined suspension of that intelligence, an purposive ignorance[10]. At second best, intelligence is endurance in the face of unknowingness and homelessness. To read his poetry is to witness the mind pushed to the edge of capitulation. Stevens is a poet who sees that "The air is not a mirror but bare board."(CP, 384) What we confront in reading him are walls of obscurity so intractable that all connotations of obscurity's haziness or smokiness drop from it. The obscurity too is like bare board. Our intelligence no longer permeates and inhabits. It runs into a wall. In this poem, the form is clear but the parts are vague, so that our question no longer lingers on WHAT the object is, but HOW.

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[10] Bloom helpfully explains on Page 177 of "Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate," that "Ignorance," in Stevens, does not mean lack of knowledge, but what it finally means in the late poem "Saint John and the Back-Ache": "the little ignorance that is everything,/ The possible nest in the invisible tree," or ignorance as an abstraction or a fabrication in Valery's sense." Bloom takes abstractness to be the move or withdraw away from something, so that It Must Be Abstract means in effect It Must Be Antithetical...essentially contra Naturam.

It has the same effect of Shklovsky's idea of "defamiliarization." Shklovsky wrote that "Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war...And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony...The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception..."[11] I think Stevens' obscurity is an extreme version of Shklovsky's idea because Shklovsky never doubts that one can return to the object; changed, purified, enlightened; the individual perceiving the stone always knows it is a stone, it is just that the stoniness is "recovered." The word "recover" has the connotation of a triumphant return. For Stevens however, the "unfamiliar," the tiger in red weather, the bucks and the firecat, the emperor of ice cream, are not things that were ever familiar in the first place. We have not, essentially "lost the savor" of the thing; we never possessed it. Nonetheless we are immediately displaced and we confront the terror of having no way of returning to the object. Our ever penetrating and possessive minds, which on most days act the "Socrates of snails" and "musician of lutes," have been cast out. The mind, in reading Stevens' obscure poems exists in the state of homelessness. It is the same condition that Stanley Cavell wrote about in his discussion of King Lear, that

> [t]he perception or attitude demanded in following this drama is one which demands a continuous attention to what it happens at each here and now, as if everything of significance is happening at this moment, while each thing that happens turns a leaf of time. I think of it as an experience of continuous presentness. Its demands are as rigorous as those of any spiritual exercise – to let

[11] Viktor Shklovsky: "Art as Technique", In: Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds): Literary Theory. An Anthology, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell,1998), 18.

> the past go and to let the future take its time; so that we not allow the past to determine the meaning of what is now happening and that we not anticipate what will come of what has come. [12]

Since there are no points of reference from our repository of stock terms and images, from our memory to understand the object before us, we can only observe in suspension and respond to it spontaneously. The brune figure demands continuous attention with no promise of return. If habit and repetition is "recollecting forward"[13] then obscurity is the splinter in circular repetitions, the dotted line that breaks the continuity of circlular existences. Our exile from the object allows us to live in the very present that Stanley Cavell talks about – where everything significant happens right now.

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[12] Quoted in: Katalin G. Kallay, Going Home Through Seven Paths to Nowhere: Reading Short Stories By Hawthorne, Poe, Melville and James, (Budapest, Hungary: Akademiai Kiado), 23.

[13] Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975.), 79

R.P Blackmur read "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" as two epitaphs, whole within themselves, acting as contrasts. I read this poem as a play where ongoing and simultaneous actions occur in two separate rooms. Plays are unique because they work "intensively with notions of inside and outside,"[14] and here the tension is two-fold: the poem struggles both with the tension between the two rooms as well as the tension between the poem (the stage) and the "real world," (the audience). Stevens dramatized space in "Emperor of Ice Cream" in two rooms, visible to the audience though neither visible to each other. We are made the more powerful perceiver. The space of the stage, what Vendler calls the "spatial structure" of the poem is a dialectic as well as a synthesis. The dramatic tension occurs within the room, between the rooms, and also as one single event. B.P Blackmur, in his essay celebrating the use of ambiguity in Stevens' work, writes that in "The Emperor of Ice-cream" is a case where

> "two ideas or images about death – the living and the dead – have been associated, and are now permanently fused. If the mind is a rag-bag, pull out two rags and sew them together. If the materials were contradictory, the very contradiction, made permanent, becomes a kind of unison. By associating ambiguities found in nature in a poem we reach a clarity, a kind of transfiguration even, whereby we learn what the ambiguity was."[15]

When I first read Blackmur, I'd misread his analogy on the ragbag. Instead of reading it as two rags sewn into one bag, I'd read it as two separate rag-bag pockets, which seemed

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[14] Gay McAuley, Space In Performance: Making Meaning In the Theatre. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,1999), 37.
[15] Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller. The Achievement of Wallace Stevens. [1st ed.]. (Philadelphia: Lippincott,1962), 59.

logically "contradictions made permanent" (Two discrete entities, a frame against frame, two secrets, separate but connected.) Blackmur by creating only one pocket sees resolution and "clarity" in the hodgepodge of objects from both stanzas.[16] While I agree that two rags sewn together creates "a kind of unity," it is a forced, problematic, unresolved and perverse unity, that least of all does not end in "clarity." I am not saying that the ragbag is completely closed – only partially. The absurd associations between "unlike" characters and objects make this poem strange and eccentric. Nonetheless, the objects on this stage cannot help but exert worldly values, signifying a connection to an external and understandable world.[17] And despite the unlikely array of objects, they start

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[17] Gay McAuley writes on page 174 of "Space In Performance: Making Meaning In the Theatre" that "Baurdrillard argues that the important thing about any object is not so much the object itself or its ability to perform a given operation (which he sees as its denotative level of significance), but the connotative level "whereby the object acquires value, is commercialized, personalized, through which it becomes useable and enters into a cultural system" the objects a person buys, possess, displays reveals a good deal about that person and they exist, in Baudrillard's view, less as material things than as signs in a system of signs: "the object can go beyond its primary function and attain a secondary function, can become an element of combination, calculation or play in a universal system of sings" Later, McAuley writes that "insofar as it is real, the object onstage exists in relationship to the world outside the theatre and it derives much of its expressive power from this fact. Objects in the world contain their own gestural demands, impose certain gestural behaviors on their users, exist in relation to corporeal and social practices"

to cobble together a narrative. Their efforts, however, are subverted in the last moment when the nonsensical line, "The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream," rudely dispels any "worldly" signification. Therefore, the poem struggles with both the inevitability of signification, of our making sense of it , and also its need to remain a secret.

The action in the first stanza occurs outside the bedroom, in the kitchen, by the front door, in the living room – the area of public and communal activity, the place where individuals participate in a market driven economy, where social contracts can be regulated, where advertising and journalism inform the characters' understanding of others and of themselves, where production and consumption – who does most of the work and who does most of the buying— form and divide relationships. All of this creates the first scene in the house, and shows that within this small stage is a microcosm of man's world. There is a man, women and boys:

> Call the roller of big cigars,
>
> The muscular one, and bid him whip
>
> In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
>
> Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
>
> As they are used to wear, and let the boys
>
> Bring glowers in last month's newspapers.
>
> Let be be finale of seem.

The only emperor I the emperor of ice-cream.

The man is producer, and while concupiscent curds are not what he is used to producing, by bringing him into the kitchen, a traditionally feminine space, he experiences a resurgence in virility, in sexual energy. The producer of commodities experiences the impulse to produce bodily, and to engage in something lusty, depraved, vulgar, outside of both work and the market economy. Stevens left it ambiguous whether he meant for the wenches to be servant girls or prostitutes, but in this case, they make up the only female presence in the first scene. They dawdle and waste time. Unlike the roller of big cigars, they are not efficient, working citizens but stand relatively still and wear "such dress/ As they are used to wear." If the roller of the big cigars symbolize progress, capitalism, future turning inward back to no progress, back to the feminine domestic space, then the women, who in their old clothes, their slowness, stand for history. But to have the roller, symbolic future turn away from its promises and to go back home into the kitchen, away from the open-end and back to the dead-end, amongst the wenches implies that time has slowed down. This room is the meeting place of movements backward and movements forward. Meanwhile, the boys come and bring "flowers in last month's newspapers," and we know that progress has stopped within this house.

What we see in this poem is "circularity" – the return from the industrial to the domestic, the motion of whipping, the dawdling and getting nowhere, the wearing of old dresses, old newspapers which runs in circulation. These individuals move and move in dynamic contrast with each other, but they do not make advances. These characters cannot 'transcend' this stage, they can only become variations of themselves depending on what objects and what individuals they are surrounded with. How can they stop from merely

circulating? What can they do to exit the stage? The poem does not offer us a solution, a means of mending things or to infuse the situation with hope. Deus ex machina is not an option in this play, although still the show must end and so in "Let be be finale of seem," the curtain drops in the middle of the play as a non-climactic, non-cathartic, artificial finale. It is an end because it must end, not because anything has been resolved. The poem is not cathartic, delivers us not to knowledge, but into more obscurity. The poem demands that we watch the endless circular motions of its characters but offers us nothing in return. In talking about making circles, Bachelard writes that

> "in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses. But what a spiral man's being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral! One no longer knows right way whether one is running toward the center or escaping"[18]

In this poem, circularity produces inwardness, a centripetal force spiraling into the stage and away from the audience, away from significance.

Meanwhile, however, the circular objects and motions are interrupted when the Horny Feet protrude into the space of the bedroom, the space of the living (unlike a casket where she should be), which is jarring surprise. The feet that "protrude" are violence and assault to the eye, but of course the only person who beholds this is the reader. The word "protrude" is derived from the Latin "Protrudere," meaning to "thrust forward." There is an aggressiveness of effect, an aggression upon the space of the room and a disruption of the innocuous circular-ing that has been dominant in this poem. Death is rude and cold and does

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[18] Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space. (Boston: Beacon Press, 19691964), 27.

not care about your feelings. The circles and roundness are symbols of life (suspended but life nonetheless), enacted in repetition and human creation. The roller of cigars, the women, the boys participate by their circling and are themselves representations of life (physical strength <muscles>, sexuality <concupiscent curds, the double meaning of wenches>, youth <boys>, beauty<flowers>). The woman's death creates an unhomliness, and introduces the disjunct to all this circling (the round knobs are gone leaving holes) to create an estrangement for both the characters next door as well as us, the reader.

In his chapter on "Kenosis or Repetition and Discontinuity," Harold Bloom writes that "The *unhemlich*, or "unhomely" as the "uncanny," is perceived wherever we are reminded of our inner tendency to yield to obsessive patterns of action. Overruling the pleasure principle, the *daemonic* in oneself yields to a "repetition compulsion."[19] It is the disjunction, the linearity of the horny feet that disrupts the circularity of the characters in the next room and awakens them to what the circularity *really* means. Up to this point I have been arguing that circularity is a ritual of life; that the characters keep circulating, as if to suspend time in order to destroy the function that plots the inevitable endpoints of their fate – death. But repetition, as Freud says (quoted by Bloom) is also "primarily a mode of compulsion… reduced to the death instinct by way of inertia, regression, entropy."[20] In support of this idea, Lacan says that "in the same way as the compulsion to repeat…has in view nothing less than the historicizing temporality of the experience of transference, so does the death instinct essentially express the limit of the historical function of the subject."[21] The

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[19] Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 77.
[20] Ibid., 80
[21] Ibid., 81

repetition is the expenditure of life, the "exhaustion of being which consumes itself,"[22] and the circularity takes on in this view a sort of spiraling inward to nothingness. So when critics read this poem as "death and life coexist, side by side," they are not wrong, but I think they are missing some of the perversity, a suicidal thrust (or just realistic?) to this poem that when combined with the voyeurism it asks of its reader, darkens the light and childish[23] lines "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream," even if we do not know what they mean.

Nonetheless, we remain only on the surface of this poem. The unyielding line "The only emperor is the emperor of Ice-cream" emits no significance and freezes what has been an active, revolving world of stage theatre; the line's recalcitrance turns the actions on stage into an image. The characters as images rather than moving targets are self-sufficient. As J. Hillis-Miller says, they "entirely contain their own reality. They are not symbolic. They are what they are. In this they are like physical objects, for these too, in Stevens' world, do not have meaning, nor do they point toward some ideal world which they signify."[24] In his book "Resistance to Poetry," James Longenbach says that Wonder experienced in reading poetry is the experience of "discovery." Our mind treads through the unknown and disentangles step by step what lies in darkness before us, the poem revealing itself only at the moment we confront it. Our contact with the poem is, then, always spontaneous. However, the poem ultimately never allows itself to become known to us and its success

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[22] Ibid.

[24] J. Hillis-Miller Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-century Writers, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 22.

> inheres in the realization that we cannot count on it. Its ephemeral consolation depends precisely on its being ephemeral, open to the vicissitudes of self-doubt. Not wonder, but composed wonder. Not the compositions achieved, but the composition unraveling"[25]

We can never truly understand or get to the "center" of a poem and our last step towards it is always at the last moment blighted by the poem's resistance to us, by its jealous secrecy. The Emperor of Ice-Cream has been read as a happy celebration of life's richness despite the transience of life; it has also been read as something perverse and cynical, clownish and perverse, but no one knows exactly what the emperor is supposed to be. Kenneth Lincoln called this poem a "little nonsense ditty"[26] and Milton Bates calls the subject "mere costume," not in a pejorative sense, but in the sense that poetry must not be disclosed too easily. In the case of "Emperor of Ice –cream," what cannot be understood necessarily calcifies the poem and turns "language art into object art."[27] To encounter the poem as object is be homeless, since our subjectivity cannot fully penetrate the hardened object. As I established earlier in this chapter, the state of homelessness is the state of present time becoming "continuous" and extended, making experience more intensely felt – everything that is occurring right now. It is the feeling of suspension without the drudgerous connotations of purgatory. The attempt of the characters in the

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[25]James Longenbach, The Resistance to Poetry, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 108.

[26]Kenneth Lincoln, Sing With the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native And American Poetry, 1890-1999, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)

[27] B.J. Leggett, Wallace Stevens And Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 167.

public rooms to suspend time through circulating is disrupted by the horny feet, and ironically, it is the disruption that allows them to experience true suspension: homelessness and displacement. Or perhaps this is just a more round-about way of saying that they have become aware of their mortality, discovering that while time is finite, the life that could be lived in it, infinite.

Chapter 2: Multitude of Lesser Things

A home is not a home without the objects that fill its space. In his 1916 play 'Bowl, Cat, Broomstick', Stevens writes "How little it would take to turn the poets into the only true comedians! There's no truer comedy than this hodge podge of men and sunlight, women and moonlight, houses and clouds, and so on." (OP,) Stevens is interested in the many, not the singular, the hodge podge not the pantheon, the domestic and humble, not of deities or warlords. Small objects and miniatures. Along with this is a penchant for small ideas, but in a multitude. In a letter to his wife on December 7th, 1908, still fifteen years before the publication of Harmonium, Stevens wrote about his meeting with a "little weazened fellow" in his office:

> We gabbled about Michael Angelo – he , for – I, against. And don't you agree with me that if we could get the Michael Angelos out of our heads – Shakespeare, Titian, Goethe – all the phenomenal men, we should find a multitude of lesser things (lesser but a multitude) to occupy us? It would be like withdrawing the sun and bringing out innumerable stars. I do not mean that the Michael Angelos are not what they are – but I like Dr. Campion, I like Verlaine – water-colors, little statues, small thoughts." (L,110)

Do a multitude of stars have less force than a single sun? Or can one man study the small with a greater degree of care and intensity than something big and overwhelming? Stevens, himself, is a man of salad-beds rather than the moody rucks of the sea. A man of many-sides and the owner of many-things. The tendency to sprawl or

to be many-sided[28] is first channeled towards a center-as-house, but Stevens' mind cannot bear to be limited, and so individual objects, miniatures become the nodes of interest and focus in which he can jump and play. Gaston Bachelard, in his book "Poetics of Space," writes that

> "Values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Platonic dialectics of large and small do not suffice for us to become cognizant of the dynamic virtues of miniature thinking. One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small."[29]

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[28] Richard Ellman's extraordinarily fascinating essay: "How Stevens saw himself" cites a journal entry written on July 31, 1899, before Stevens turned twenty, of an "intellectual crisis":

> Somehow what I do seems to increase in its artificiality. Those cynical years when I was about twelve subdued natural and easy flow of feelings. I still scoff too much, analyze too much and see, perhaps, too many sides of a thing – but not always the true sides. (L, 31)

Ellman's comments that:

> The word "many-sided" was not in itself pejorative; in fact, the term was customarily applied in the nineteenth century to Goethe, who himself liked to use it, though in Wilhelm Meister he said the quality was useful only if it were a prelude to single-sidedness. At first, however, Stevens allied it with his tendencies toward cynicism and artificiality and feared that the many sides he saw were not the right ones...Perhaps, like Yeats, he felt that he was on the path of the chameleon, and being, as he said later, at that time "all imagination" (L, 320), he felt drawn in too many directions, toward too many "jocular procreations of the dark" (364). Only gradually did he find "the courage to be himself, which is, I suppose, the first necessity of any artist."

[29] Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, (Boston: Beacon Press, 19691964), 150.

The smallness of the object does not make for a small idea. It just means that the object is highly condensed. I follow here with a reading of a "small" poem that has largely been overlooked by Stevens' critics. "Earthy Anecdote" occurs outside in nature, but I think it is illustrative for our purposes of studying the miniature. "Earthy Anecdote" is the first poem in Stevens' body of work and therefore marks as an important optic into how we can view his craft.

"Earthy Anecdote" is in every aspect a humble poem, not only in its function (and failure) as an anecdote but also in the failure of its "swift circular lines" to live up to another famous American circle, Emerson's circles. Here is the poem:

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 they swerved

In a swift circular line

To the left,

Because of the firecat. (CP, 3)

The problem in reading this poem for a meaning is that no one really knows what the fire-cat is. Stevens was aware of the temptation to read this poem as one about "Original Chaos," and said in a letter commenting on Walter Pach's accompanying picture that "I had meant for something more concrete. Real animals." The bucks go clattering, creating metallic, clumsy sounds, never subtle, more bullish than the Cs in "Comedian." The firecat, a supernatural animal of Stevens' imagination is the agent of the buck's actions. The swift circular lines in Oklahoma fall short of America's most famous circle, Emerson's circles. Emerson's circles were metaphors used to describe the human condition where man is described as a "self evolving circle," who "rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles," and where "there [are] no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us." The bucks' circular lines, not even a full circle but a parabola is not "progress" but avoidance. There are no "net gains" in this swerve, only evasion of something to be avoided, something that could have produced a loss.

But loss of what? B.J. Leggett writes that the problem in reading "Earthy Anecdote," is that, unlike the other perspectival poems, it "does not make altogether clear the nature of its ordering principle." Critics have identified the fire-cat as "lightning, a

prairie fire, the sun, a mountain, an oil well, a real animal," none of which has given definitive or satisfactory interpretation.[30] Leggett goes on to say that Earthy Anecdote "reverses in one sense the pattern of the poems of order in that it is not the thing to be ordered that evades description ...but the principle of order itself."[31] The only definitive thing is the movement itself. The poem favors the spatial over the temporal. The circular lines are important visual presences and are repeated and described diligently even when the reader is already aware of their pattern. The goal here is "particularity" and its commitment to detail and need to render something as closely and as truthfully as possible make it seem like visual art. Every time the bucks swerve, they open up space in the Cartesian coordinates of our mind. The poem desires to be plotted, rather than understood or generalized.

The poem also fails at its job as an anecdote. An anecdote is a piece of lost gossip, and as Frank Lentricchia has already laid out for us, it is an unpublished little story "funny and biographical, apparently stands in for a bigger story, a socially pivotal and culturally pervasive biography which it illuminates."[32] The anecdote is immediately miniature, a derivative. Its purpose is not to stand for itself but to act as a signpost that guides us to something bigger and more important. In this poem in particular, the anecdote's ambition is drawn even smaller: not even "Anecdote of Earth," but "Earthy Anecdote," so that the adjective "Earthy" indicates that what we have in front of us is, a

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[31] B.J. Leggett, Early Stevens: the Nietzschean Intertext. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.), 209.
[32]Frank Lentricchia, Ariel And the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens, (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 3.

derivative to the second-degree of that "large unspoken story." Being twice removed, the poem fails to produce, on a social and community level, insight into a larger story.

Though it does not provide us with a social narrative, the swift circular line does provide us with something extremely valuable. It presents, in one instant, the movement (swerve) as well as the physical markings of that movement (swift circular line) and in this way this poem acts as a sort of rolling camera– except distilled on paper and in words. This poem becomes a sort of static movement. It becomes a "continuous present." As always, J. Hillis- Miller puts it concisely: "the present evanescent as it is, is the only reality, and it is only in the moment, a moment which changes and evaporates with the utmost rapidity, that man can glimpse things as they are. Things exist only in the time they are moving from is to was."[33]

To bring our discussion back into the domestic, I turn toward another poem that is filled with circles, this time real ones. Like "Earthy Anecdote," I hesitate to read "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" symbolically, since Stevens was interested more in the surface of objects, the shapes and forms, the outlines, rather than the "meaning" of the object. J.Hillis Miller provides with a gloss on the "shallowness" of Stevens' poetry that can help us understand this poem:

> The death of the gods exist not only as Stevens' theoretical presupposition, but the intimate texture of his verse. His images entirely contain their own reality. They are not symbolic. They are what they are...this absence of any transcendent

[33] J. Hillis-Miller, The Act of the Mind: Essays On the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965),153.

> reality to which images might refer is related to Stevens' assumption that things are what they appear to be: colored forms in motion.[34]

Thus, in "Disillusionment," Stevens remains on the surface, and his complaint against the staidness and the vapidity of the nightgowns have to do with surface blankness, the lack of variety, nuance, color.

> None are green,
> Or purple with green rings,
> Or green with yellow rings,
> Or yellow with blue rings.
> None of them are strange,
> With socks of lace
> And beaded ceintures. (CP, 66)

The peignoirs, coffee, oranges, and cockatoos on a rug in "Sunday Morning" are shapely, pungent and brilliant. Unlike them, the white nightgowns do not signify itself as something "different," do not present itself as teeming with life, of projecting a fully present personality. None of the nightgowns are strange. The word "Strange" comes via the Old French "estrange," which comes from the Latin *extraneus, meaning* "foreign." None of the nightgowns are charming or "other" enough to transform its wearer, nor to bring her into its "otherness." The different colored rings, the lace, the beaded ceintures are different linguistic signifiers that allow the wearer to move away from his or her own drabness. The night-gowns provide *travel* into another type of being, without

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[34] J. Hillis-Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-century Writers (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965) 227-228.

movement.[35] The white night gowns signify the repression of the naturally colorful, exuberant and full of movement. The whiteness and the staidness are artificial, refined, mechanized, produced, something that requires upkeep, a silencing of expression and most importantly, of imagination, of which the rings, the ceintures, the lace express eloquently and freely. The nightgowns with rings are more natural because it flows; its motion is comfortable and repetitive (purple with green rings....). The rings and the ceintures allow for travel. It mimics the flow of flux, while at the same time tries to distill it through its representation/mimic.

Even if all movement is arbitrary, mere flux, the goal is still to continue to make note, to mark and therefore to create outlines and orders around objects of interest. Emerson says that we have no circumference, no bounds. Stevens laments the fact that we have what seems to be too much space. So the totalizing numbness of the white nightgowns, where there is no differentiation or points to cling onto, is made more particular by the rings and the ceintures. Those "additives" are points for the eye to rest and cling. The beaded ceinture wraps around and shapes the nightgowns and acts as a bound. It may circumscribe the space but it does so by also bring its own decorations, the beads. Space must be enclosed and the space must have particularities. Stevens wrote in a letter to Hi Simons, saying that "Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination."

I have focused in this section on two small poems, miniature in size, both of which are playful and light. What miniature poems accomplish for us is that they allow

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[35] The impulse in "Disillusionment" seems to be the opposite to "Earthy Anecdote." The latter creates. suspension in movement while the first creates movement in stasis.

the mind to look at it in scrupulous particularity, so we can treat the miniature poem as object art as well. The miniature poem allows us to feel present time suspended without feeling homeless at the same time. The miniature poem can both be possessed (possessed with scrupulous gaze) as well as overlooked. And in this way, miniature poems, miniature ideas, objects, art, etc, require a sort of discovery and unraveling on the part of the searcher, not too different from the type of search he or she does when countered by an obscure poem.

There is another sort of "miniature-izing" that we have not discussed, and that is the purposeful reduction of significance. James Longenbach reads "The Comedian as the Letter C" against "The Waste Land," concluding that Stevens was writing about a "single writer's experience," in order to resist the dominant literary trend of the time to write about apocalypse and catastrophe:

> "Rejecting both the apocalypse of the isolated self and the apocalypse of a culture's demise, "The Comedian as the Letter C" affirms historical continuity, a social and comic vision chosen over the tragedian's lonely fate. If Stevens gives us Crispin "concluding fadedly," it is because he is more interested in the poem's moral victory than in what appears to some as its aesthetic failure, and he is unwilling to write a poem that writes off social nature in a self serving vision of the end."[36]

Longenbach, like most of Stevens' critics, reads this poem autobiographically, and concludes that "We have to accept that for Stevens, poetry came second (to work and

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[36] James Longenbach, Wallace Stevens: the Plain Sense of Things. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 93.

family)."[37] Most critics see this as Stevens' farewell to poetry during his "second silence" in the 1920s when Stevens began to focus seriously on his career.

This poem can be seen as a circle, where all vectors of intention, motivation and action dissipate into nothingness, where even each regression is then haunted by progress. This means that there are never any "net gains or losses," and its only lesson to us is in the "absolute absence of absolutes."[38] I take the terms "net gains" and the phrase "absolute absence of absolutes" from a young Samuel Beckett, whose essay on Joyce's purgatory, in comparison to Dante's, has a lot of resonance with Stevens' work:

> "A last word about the purgatories. Dante's is conical and consequently implies culmination. Mr. Joyce's is spherical and excludes culmination. ...in the one, absolute progression and a guaranteed consummation: in the other there is no ascent and no ideal vegetation. In the one movement is unidirectional and a step forward represents a net advance: in the other movement is non directional – or multi directional, and a step forward is by definition, a step back. ...in what sense, then, is Joyce's work purgatorial? In the absolute absence of the absolute.[1]
>
> (Dante...Vico...Bruno...Joyce)

Stevens tendency is also the sprawl, but he channels that energy into making circles. He follows what seems at first a straight line but does this only to destroy itself, gaining nothing. In a letter written later in his life, Stevens said that "one moves in many

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Samuel Beckett, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On: a Selection From Samuel Beckett's Work. (New York: Grove Press ; distributed by Random House, 1976), 257.

directions at once. No man of imagination is prim: the thing is a contradiction in terms. It is true that, if we are to eliminate systems as we go along (and it is obvious that everyone is fairly busy at that) we have got to replace them, unless we are to live like Abyssinians. System of some sort is inescapable." (L, 789) The plot in "Comedian" destroys every beginning and every renewal of beginning. This poem shows us the continual failure of systems of belief.

This is not a "typical" story about homecoming as movement away from the home, a turning around and a movement back to the home, where alienation redeems itself by allowing the subject to understand themselves and the world better. Crispin's homecoming is filled with anguish and bitterness, feelings of failure. Yet, the plot still refuses finality. As Stevens explained to Hi-Simons in a letter: "The way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism, and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle re-commences and the thing goes from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again. No doubt one could demonstrate that the history of the thing is the history of a cycle," we understand that Crispin's final analysis is only another short stop. The ending comes only because the poem must formally end. To leave an end open, and to leave Crispin floating, without self-closure is to leave the reader with only qualified meanings, tentative conclusions. This makes the ending less significant.

The World Without Imagination and The Loss of Language/Metaphor

Harold Bloom has said that we can either read "The Comedian as the Letter C" as the crown jewel of Harmonium or as its exasperation.[39] As a first time reader of the poem, we might easily be exasperated by its language. Frank Kermode famously called it "a sustained nightmare of unexpected diction."[40] However, none of us can deny that the person most exasperated is Crispin, with his back turned away from his home, he faces not freedom, but the unknowable, the claustrophobic sense of infinity. Perhaps our exasperation is to mirror his.

Twice removed from the formula of Classical epics, the conflicts in Stevens' mock-epic are not supplied by Homeric pagan gods or a Miltonic Judeo-Christian God; the modern epic narrates the struggle of the lone atheist. "The Comedian as the Letter C" goes even further to isolate its hero. It eludes from making reference or making homage to history and resists grounding itself in literary tradition. Instead, it relies on the hilarity, even the ribaldry of its language to supply itself with richness and to "justify" an epic about an "everyman." Language is highly perfomative and competes with character and plot in occupying center stage. The poem is about failure, the unmaking of the self, of bumbling through life making mistakes, of remaking those same mistakes. It is about the collapse of philosophical systems, of the blind spots and the limitations that people impose upon themselves when they cling obdurately to meanings and metaphors.

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[39] Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: the Poems of Our Climate. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 70.
[40] Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens. (New York: Chip's Bookshop, 19791960), 38.

This poem is about Crispin as traveler but it is also about Crispin as a reader and writer. In the beginning the type of writing he does exemplifies ownership or patronage, "sovereign of ghosts," "the Socrates of snails, "musicians of pears," the type of writing that assumes "voice over" his subjects or myth-making. This use of language is colonial and there is a psychological aggressiveness here, where the poet wants not only to "represent" the object, but to possess and speak for it. This type of writing, "a dissertation of profound delight" is easy because the subject of reading is small and simple enough to be internalized. What is external and understandable can be possessed, and what can be possessed will be expressed.

But when Crispin, culture junkie and patron of his dominion first encounters the sea, he is reduced and wiped clean of all cultural signifiers and occupational fragments with which he cobbles together to define himself and his reality: "What counted was mythology of self,/Blotched out beyond unblotching." No longer finding the self in linguistic signifiers "the ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak/ of china, cap of Spain" he peers into the sea-glass, here a deft pun on C-Glass, and feels as if he has been "washed away by magnitude./ A whole of life that still remained in him/ Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear." All has become sensation without perception, feeling without cognition. The single sound is a tone and has no form. Unlike the snails, the pears, the silentious porpoises, and waves that were mustachios, all of which have form, materiality, significance, the single strumming in our comedian's ear is random signal. It is white noise. This temporary immateriality, in which he identifies as Triton's condition, "nothing left of him/ Except in faint, memorial gesturings," means to become "nothing," will-less, desire-less, where one's existence is only to stand in the presence of that

sublime sea: "the sea/ Severs not only lands but also selves./Here was no help before reality."

He is "washed away by magnitude," possessed and colonized by this new reality. Encountering a reality where "a polyphony beyond his baton's thrust," Crispin discovers the limit of his own capabilities, the limit of his vocabulary, the limit of his metaphor-making. Crispin, who speaks in porpoises, jupes and gelatines confronts the singular magnitude of the sea and cannot express it, rendering his old vocabulary obsolete. This loss of the former self, "just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved" in which he is stripped bare of cultural signifiers and old metaphors renders the comedian nameless:

> What word split up in clickering syllables
>
> And storming under multitudinous tones
>
> Was name for this short shakes in all that brunt.

The temporary loss of a self is closely tied to loss of vocabulary and metaphor. Crispin's inability to describe the new reality before him with the language of his past means that he loses, temporarily, control and grip on the world. He beholds but cannot understand. The only mental work that he is able to engage in is to turn backwards, remember, and return to stock knowledge. Looking back, he cannot do anything but see it with contempt. He rejects old metaphors, which is also to reject one's culture:

> The dead brine melted in him like a dew
>
> Of winter, until nothing of himself

Remained, except some starker, barer self

In a starker, barer world, in which the sun

Was not the sun because it never shone

With bland complaisance on pale parasols,

Beetled, in chapels, on the chaste bouquets. (CP, 29)

Crispin's initial alienation creates an inwardness. What we call "self-consciousness" *does* create "the other," or the conscience, the hovering didactic, reflective self, the self as a post-crisis historian. However, this "other" always fails to project right action for the future, being still "none-the-wiser" in unraveling the truth or in discovery. Crispin's trouble is that none of his metaphors ever last, least of all prophesize or stand in the face of new challenges.

Yucatan and Homelessness

Another loss that occurs in this poem, closely related to both loss of self-definition and loss of language/metaphor, is homelessness. This refers to both physical homelessness, as well as a metaphorical homelessness when Crispin loses his poetic subject. In this poem, Crispin is either partaking in the expression of nature (therefore, at home in nature), or being battered by nature's expression (homeless in nature). For Crispin, writing means a sense of "belonging," a feeling of "being at home." When Crispin encounters the infinitude of the sea as well as the storm of Yucatan, he finds himself "too destitute to find/In any commonplace the sought-for aid" because "He was a man made vivid by the sea." Each catastrophe that Crispin endures in his travels creates a rupture in his understanding of reality. Each catastrophe is followed by silence, or "homelessness," which is a shifting ground or a period of recuperation where Crispin

must first contend with the uselessness of his old metaphors while dealing with a loss of direction. I focused earlier that the possession of language, and even more so, the act of writing, is intrinsically a part of being and the expression of that being. Here, I make the connection between feeling "at home," and possessing a subject that one can write about. What I try to accomplish by connecting these three ideas together (Being, Writing and now, Belonging/Home) is to show something that Martin Hedeigger has already taught us in "Building Dwelling Thinking." Dwelling and Being are one and the same:

"Where the word bauen still speaks in its original sense it also says how far the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, bauen, buan, bhu, beo are our word bin in the versions: ich bin, I am, du bist, you are, the imperative form bis, be. What then does ich bin mean? The old word Bauen, to which the bin belongs, answers: ich bin, du bist mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell."[41]

When Crispin encounters Nature in its fullest and most powerful form, he becomes reshaped, re-written, and reborn. Once a myth-maker, Crispin comes to Yucatan and becomes an exegete, a discoverer looking for beginnings, elements, transcendence.

Crispin foresaw a curious promenade

Or, nobler, sensed an elemental fate,

And elemental potentices and pangs,

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[41] Martin Heidegger. Poetry, Language, Thought. [1st ed.] (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 147.

And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen,

Making the most of savagery of palms

Of moonlight on the thick, cadaverous bloom

That yuccas breed and of the panther's tread.

That fabulous and its intrinsic verse

Came like two spirits parleying, adorned

In radiance from the Atlantic cougn,

For Crispin and his quill to catechize.

And Later:

The affectionate emigrant found

A new reality in parrot-squawks.

Writing and production occur when reality coheres and makes sense. Homelessness occurs when nature silences Crispin's speech, when it makes itself singular and intractable (a singular truth is also a silencing truth), when all its multiplicity is washed away, taking with it the "materia poetica" with which Crispin can create resemblances and make connections with. Crispin's critical powers allow him to see reality in a coherent way again. Although he no longer owns this reality, as he did in that

"world without imagination," he nonetheless exercises his new powers as exegete without weariness or self-doubt. Again, he has found a home "of which he is of some importance," where his metaphors are again useful, "green barbarism turning paradigm."

Approaching Carolina

By the time he reaches Carolina in section III, after the storm, Crispin has learned in his encounter with the sublime of the storm and the sea, that there is nothing in nature that is "unexpressed" by itself already, which leaves no room for him to "annotate." In Carolina, Crispin resists the temptation to write poetry and instead chooses to study under "relentless contact" with reality, to "humbly serve/ Grotesque apprenticeship to chance even." (CP, 39) His resistance against writing is also resistance against interpretation -- or thinking under a system of established beliefs. It is to be against understanding and definitiveness. This is the same to say that Crispin's rejection of the easily understandable, is a resistance against making facts into Truisms, against turning "Green Barbarism into Paradigm." Again homeless and without a subject, Crispin waits for a new subject for him to exercise his poetic capability. Meanwhile he reads, he absorbs, he collects, he subjects himself to anything, and arrives at, what appears again, to be the final discovery. This time, he revels in dirt, what Freud called the antithesis of civilization:

> He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells
> Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
> From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,

Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.
He savored rankness like a sensualist.
He marked the marshy ground around the dock,
The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence,
Curriculum for the marvellous sophomore.
It purified. It made him see how much
Of what he saw he never saw at all. (CP, 36)

It is surprising that Stevens chooses to say that the smell "rounded" Crispin's aesthetic rather than "severed" or "destroyed". The arrant stink rounds the aesthetic theory so that Crispin not only traverses linearly between two poles, lushness against austerity, but the stink pulls the linearity outwards and creates the second dimension. Dirt, decay, the adds complexity to the "elemental fate" that Crispin learns in Yucatan. Elemental fates might be stripped bare of myths but it carries connotations of cleanliness, of Edenic originalism. Here the stink creates a purity that is different, that refers to "totality" and "wholesomeness" rather than spotlessness. In this way, the Carolinas produce the effect of a "morose chiaroscuro," carrying with it, depth, rather than the lush but flat color of Yucatan.

The motion of Crispin's travels is like a wave, sinusoidal; in frames juxtaposed next to each other it is up and down; he is constantly "enlarging," or "rounding out" as well as being reduced or purified. Seen as a whole, it is a circle. The comic individual cannot adapt immediately to the present, because, being mechanical, he or she applies a formula-for-action (derived from the past) that fails to confront the demands of present reality. In

his book "Laughter," Henri Bergson writes that "Life presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes backwards and never repeats anything."[42] The comic hero cannot have any "significance" because he is always starting something and then abandoning it (or being abandoned by it), he does not build up to anything. He lives in a time that is always severed off from each other, so that language, culture, and memory always seem like a step-behind or insufficient in helping him deal with the challenges that he faces in his journey.

[42] Bergson, Henri, and Cloudesley Shovell Henry Brereton. Laughter: an Essay On the Meaning of the Comic. (London: Macmillan and co. limited, 1913), 86

Chapter 3: The the

I am interested in Sunday Morning, again, about circularity, objects and place. This poem has often long been cited as a "meditation" poem, and this view has been endorsed by Stevens himself: "this is not essentially a woman's meditation on religion and the meaning of life. It is anybody's meditation" (L, 250) It is worth noting that meditation occurs alone, and again in this poem, the drama occurs within an enclosed space without referent to the outside world, this time upon one individual in solitude. When Stevens first published this poem in Harriet Monroe's magazine "Poetry", he'd agreed to her request to cut it down, asking her to order the stanzas I, VIII, IV, V, I, saying that "the order is necessary to the idea." (L, 183) It seems helpful that we read the "Sunday Morning" that appears in Harmonium according this 'idea' of the "Sunday Morning" that first appeared in "Poetry." That the poem should, after resolving its problems in stanzas VIII, IV, V, return back to the "encroaching catastrophe" again in stanza one is not only funny, pointless, perhaps mocking and self-parodying, but also suggests that the poem does not quite believe in what it resolves itself upon.

If this is a meditation poem, in the sense that it is a poem about thinking or pondering, it seems justifiable that the thinking should be displayed as circuitous, that it should travel and build upon itself, then suddenly doubt itself and to return to the original problem as if it had done nothing. However, if we take meditation to be the kind that Eleanor Cook takes, as "meditation [that] typically leads to recognition (anagnorisis) of feeling, to revelations and illuminations."[43] in other words, an epiphany, like Joyce's

[43] Eleanor Cook, Poetry, Word-play, And Word-war In Wallace Stevens, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988),103.

sudden coordination of vision, it is an insight into the absence of an epiphany, the absence of closure. Like the swerves of the bucks in Oklahoma, this poem swerves and attempts to answer the problem of the death of god but never completes its trajectory.

The peignoir, the coffee, the cockatoo upon the rug come to life, are "activated" by their association, and "mingle," come into conversation with each other. "The complacencies of the peignoir" – as if the complacencies belong to the peignoir, as if each mood, whether eagerness, enthusiasm, depression could be "wrought" or materialized through each object. The complacencies of the peignoir, the late coffee, the sunny chair, the green freedom of a cockatoo reinforce each other's action and together, as a fraternity of like-minded objects, come together to engender an ethos. Leisure, lingering, a lazy freedom. They become modes that the speaker uses to identify herself (social class, income) but also how she will act. I am and I act because I own. I act complacent because the peignoir is complacent. I am late because the coffee, my accomplice, convinces me that I should stay behind. The objects become a part of her personality. Steeped in a world where she "possesses" and therefore reigns over all objects, what is outside is culture, tradition, religion, history, and social expectations. The outside "encroaches," trespasses and exceeds proper limits. It is derived from the old French "to hook in," and so the act of encroaching is a violence upon her lazy Sunday morning. A catastrophe is of course a disaster, but we can also use the theatre definition: "the concluding part of the action in a drama, especially a classical tragedy, when the plot is resolved." Christianity is the catastrophe that threatens to end and to complete, to impose its dogma and overbearing single definition on the day. What is interesting is that

what is inside (limited space) is considered infinite with possibilities, filled with variety and movement, resemblances, and what is outside is heavy, dark and singular and flat:

The pungent oranges and bright, green wings

Seem things in some procession of the dead,

Winding across wide water, without sound,

The day is like wide water, without sound, (CP, 67)

It is not the dark, flat external representation of religion that she wants, but divinity must live within herself:

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;

Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued

Elations when the forest blooms; gusty

Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;

All pleasures and all pains, remembering

The bough of summer and the winter branch.

These are the measures destined for her soul.

These are the measures destined for her soul? The woman identifies herself with the weather – and it is important to note that she is thinking this in solitude, that is, her

reality is not conditioned by other viewpoints and that she has the luxury to choose what she wants to measure her soul against. She equates what she feels with that which is outside of her, internalizes the exterior and makes it a creation of her own. These internalizations are solipsistic, and this woman in her solitude regresses into a childlike state of equating all outside phenomena with herself and her powers. In privatizing the weather, as she privatizes her objects, each event becomes an extension of herself – each time it rains, or snows, she is reminded of herself—that is, there is no differentiation, no identity, and therefore, no will. Lentricchia reads it similarly, but though he concludes with an economic and gendered argument:

> "If no subject, divinity may be something like an intransitive verb because it takes no object. The passions, grievings, and moods have no intention: they are directed to nothing in particular. This is a divinity whose heaven is the earth, where feeling is the expression of natural process, where nature is the motor principle of expression: not passions for or about the rain, but "Passions of rain."[44]

For Lentricchia, this reading is important because his goal is to argue that Stevens uses this 'dissolution' of the woman's femininity to become a type of gendlerless mass. Stevens then transfigures the singular woman into the orgy of men in stanza VII, allowing him to reconcile his self as dandy, feminine poet with his self as masculine American male. To make this sort of argument, Lentricchia skips through stanzas III- VI, arguing that there is no argumentative or narratorial continuity between the stanzas. While the poem is disjunctive and again, like all of Stevens' poetry, difficult to bring

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[44] Frank Lentricchia, Ariel And the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 156-157.

together and synthesize into one line of thought, I would like to nonetheless to study a line of thought that may allow us to see the "idea" of the poem as a whole, rather than the idea of individual stanzas. The poem is of course moving towards a solution, an argument and it is a discursive sort of argument. Northrop Frye has showed us that when it comes to discursive writing "any poem with an idea in it is a secondary imitation of thought …deals with representative or typical thought: that is, with forms of thought rather than specific propositions."[45] That is, it is important to read this poem for its content as well as for its performance of thought, the way it builds its argument.

I left off with a reading of the woman as divinity, and therefore as an 'entity' that has no gender and no will. It is important for Stevens to do this because it allows him to establish, implicitly, in stanza IV that the woman-as-divinity "commingle" with Jove in a "requital to desire." That the woman-as-divinity remain "virginal" and pure is important to Stevens in the act of intercourse between heaven and earth, here depicted as "commingling," which ironically is reminiscent of Raphael's explanation to Adam how angels make love:

> "In eminence, and obstacle find none
>
> Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars
>
> Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace,
>
> Total they mix, union of pure with pure

[45] Northrop Frye, 'The Realistic Oriole; A Study of Wallace Stevens', in his *Fables of Identity; Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York, 1963), pp. 242

Desiring, non restrained conveyance need

As flesh to mix flesh, or soul with soul."[46]

In Sunday Morning, intercourse between heaven and earth also becomes desexualized, not of the flesh but "our blood, commingling, virginal,/ With heaven, brought such requital to desire." The woman becomes pantheistic being that "houses divinity," and by commingling with Jove ends up housing him too. Our "blood" incorporates the heavens to give them a place on earth. The intercourse between heaven and earth is depicted in economic terms: "a requital to desire," which is a payment to desire, and something done as "part of labor and a part of pain." Jove then, becomes indebted to us and he repays us by divesting his ownership of the skies and bequeathing it upon the Earth so that earth and sky are no longer separated by a "dividing and indifferent blue." Up to now, the poem has taken us from the woman as her objects (stanza I), to woman as divine nature (II), to woman as divine nature entering heaven in order to "close the skies." The space traveled has been from domestic space to nature to heaven and then back again. But it is this coming back, after not only witnessing but partaking in the dissolution of the gods that now creates a problem in stanza IV.

How strange that after this triumph in dissolving the gods, that the woman should feel in the next stanza, a feeling of bereavement, an anxiety towards the earthly paradise that she has created. She feels homeless. She turns her back on what she has accomplished thus far to feel nostalgia for what she has destroyed. It is as if Hoon wants

[46] (624-629, Book 8)

a take-back. In his essay "The Irrational Element of Poetry," delivered in 1936 at the University of Chicago, Stevens raid this famous passage:

> To see the gods dispelled in mid air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing. Since we have always shared all things with them ad have always had a part of their strength and certainly, all of their knowledge, we shared likewise this experience of annihilation…it left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted, in which the amical rooms and halls had taken on a look of hardness and emptiness. What was most extraordinary is that they left no mementoes behind, no thrones, no mystic rings, no texts either of the soil or of the soul. It was as if they had never inhabited the earth. There was no crying out for their return.

J. Hillis- Miller comments on this passage to say that: "The moment of self awareness coincides with the moment of the death of the gods. God is dead, therefore I am. But I am nothing. I am nothing because I have nothing, nothing but awareness of the barrenness within and without."[47] The woman feels an emptiness, manifested as human desire in stanza IV, and she goes on to try to resolve in stanzas V and VI. This is disjunctive, ironic poetry, modern because it takes you up to a high point, and then takes you back to where you surpassed in the beginning. The woman's complacent disbelief is taken to a

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[47] J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-century Writers. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 219

magnificent self-justifying height in stanza III, but right afterward, she becomes plagued with doubt. This poem seems just as much about growing up (the realization that one is not Hoon-like) as it is about the complication of a line of thought, the triumphant thought inverting and collapsing upon itself. The poet refuses heroic triumph and finality, and prefers diffidence and tentativeness. He follows one line of thought, realizes that it has failed, argues with himself, rejects that thought and moves on to the next one.

The woman is not some sort of pantheistic entity and her crisis of belief allows her in stanzas V and VI to discover that it is not herself as pantheistic being[48] that will resolve the crisis, but that death, the mother of beauty will come to be the "fulfillment to our dreams/ And our desire." Death creates meaning and makes purpose for us and impels us to action: "She makes the willow shiver in the sun/ for maidens who were wont to sit and gaze/ Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet."

My quick reading of stanzas V to VI is standard and not surprising. Critics have read "Sunday Morning" this way and I tend to agree with what they say. I turn back, however, to consider again, the poem's original order when it first appeared in "Poetry." A few days after asking Harriet Monroe to arrange the poem as I, VIII, IV, V, I, Stevens wrote back and asked her to place stanza VII to end the poem. This stanza is usually read as a vigorous and passionate triumph of paganism over Christianity. However, if we put the stanza at the end of the "Sunday Morning" that is ordered I, VIII, IV, V, I, then the

[48] On Page 244 of Northrop Frye's essay "The Realistic Oriole" he writes: "there are two forms of mental activity that Stevens regards as unpoetic. One is breaking down of the individual mind in an attempt to make it a medium for some kind of universal or pantheistic mind, this is typically an error of emotion...it is the preference of the invisible to the visible which impels a poet to develop a false rhetoric intended to be the voice, not of himself, but of some invisible super-bard within him (N.A, 61)...not from the annihilation of the ego, but from the ego itself. "

vital chants of the ring of men become much more ironic, the force of their song becomes much weaker, even funny:

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
>
> Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
>
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
>
> Not as god, but as a god might be,
>
> Naked among them, like a savage source.
>
> Their chant shall be the chant of paradise,
>
> Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
>
> And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
>
> The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
>
> The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills
>
> That choir among themselves long afterward.
>
> They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
>
> Of men that perish and of summer morn.
>
> And whence they came and whither they shall go
>
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

Though the woman may now enjoy her bounty, freed from the "catastrophe" of Christianity, it does not mean that she is completely freed from the "necessitous sense," the desirous need for belief. Loss of one belief creates the violent need for another – the muttering mythy-minded Jove is replaced by the perpetual suspension of desire. The chant is the earlier version of the "bread of faithful speech" (408) that the soldier lives on in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." The men in the ring chant not because they are glorified, but because they need to. They are boys whistling in the dark, creating out of their minds a new reality just as religious as the last. Amidst all this, it is only the dew on their feet that reveal Truth:

> And whence they came and whither they shall go
>
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

Stevens explained that the dew comes from all directions and leaves in all directions, and therefore means nothing. The dew is a tiny manifestation that clings and flashes, although only momentarily, the "truth." It is like the circular lines of the buck, that are meaningless after they occur, but when they do occur, act as a flash into present continuity.

Dew is an interesting motif. In Literaria Bibliographia, Coleridge characterizes Wordsworth's poems are "fresh and have dew on them." Dew is not life-giving like water, but it is a symbol of rejuvenation and youth, something that clings and cleanses. In Stevens' "Man on the Dump," (CP, 201) however, dew has been appropriated, humanized, commodified, and for the speaker, ruined:

> The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green

Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea

On a cocoanut – how many men have copied dew

For buttons, how many women have covered them-

Selves

With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew,

Heads of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.

One grows to hate these things except on the dump. (CP, 202)

The tone is sarcastic, bordering on rancid. The pace is fast and the language, built up in the heat of detestation, speech repeats and hastens in circularity:

With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads

Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.

Harold Bloom writes that "what is actually hated in the Dump poem is our mimesis of the dew, copying it or covering ourselves with its representation. Here Stevens is playing with the rather dangerous notion that you can write a poem which is "about" hating your own poems."[49] I have chosen to read "Man on the Dump" as a "resolution" to "Sunday Morning," although this statement should be taken carefully. "Sunday Morning" ends tentatively, and if didactic, or even, consoling, it is a didacticism and consolation that has

[49] Harold Bloom, (Wallace Stevens: the Poems of Our Climate. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 145

largely cooled and subdued, dispassionate, especially since it follows the heated and vigorous stanza on the turbulent ring of men. The poem ends by saying:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
>
> Or old dependency of day and night,
>
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
>
> Of that wide water, inescapable.

We live in "old dependency of day and night," clinging onto the day as dew clings onto the feet of men. It is not "old dependency of time" that we cling to, but here, something lesser, compartmentalized – day by day – each day a different type of dwelling, a different type of living and thinking. It is both the freedom of boundless belief, and also the claustrophobia of infinity which bears doubt and unbelieving. "Sunday Morning" removes itself, in the last moment from all its vigor, passion and hotness to conclude in the gorgeous lines but cool lines:

> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
>
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink
>
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

The last image as Vendler has pointed out is that of suspension: "The poet decides...to live, perhaps, in a suspended animation. The close of the poem reflects his suspension as

it broadens to as reluctant a construction as a sentence can have"[50] this suspension is not static, it is movement in the face of obscurity. It is the same as the chants of the turbulent ring of men, whose vociferations are constructions of belief, created to replace or displace disbelief, not on its merits of "truth value." After the death of the gods is only flux, and the pigeons' ambiguous undulations is the imitation of that flux, as it travels courageously on extended wings into the darkness.

"The Man on the Dump," has been long removed from "Sunday Morning's" initial crisis. Here, the poem does not begin in the morning but at dusk:

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.

The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche

Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho…The dump is full

Of images.

The tone is tight and heightened. It moves fast and shows an irritated and restless boredom. The inventory of things on the dump show objects that contain, that hold, wrap, dress and cover – images that have acted as representations of old worn out myths, now out of fashion and useless. It is interesting that it is not the dump's images that the speaker poet despises – it is the image at work, the current myth, the active exchange between the corbeil and flowers in the beginning of the poem that he hates.

One grows to hate these things *except* on the dump. (my emphasis)

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[50]Helen Vendler. On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 57-58,

Except on the dump. For when the object is on the dump one no longer desires it, it is no longer part human, "chimera of morning," (18) but itself. The poet yearns for reduction in shedding, in dumping, in purifying. His disgust here is toward multiplicity. Stevens' tendency to sprawl is always, at its final junction met with a disciplined restraint of that sprawling. It is again, to reject the trash, to efface one's old images, one's manufactured objects and also to destroy the stale mind that created it in order to inaugurate the mind's purest self:

You see

As man (not like an image of a man)

You see the moon rise in the empty sky.

What I find interesting about this poem is that most critics have read "The the" in the last stanza as the "irreducible minimum" or as the speaker himself. [51] Harold Bloom reads against the grain and against other critics and makes the most convincing case that that

> "'The the" is not a specific experience or a present moment, not oneself in any anti-Transcendental sense, and not a poetry of the irreducible minimum. "The the" is any object whatsoever, outside the self, which is in the process of being taken up again into language. Or, ironically, "The the" is a necessarily failed fresh attempt to avoid figuration, another incipient realization that there are no proper meanings in the language of poetry."[52]

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[52]Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: the Poems of Our Climate. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 147

That the speaker's fury for unity of truth, for simplicity, to see "the moon rise in the empty sky," that devastating desire to wipe the slate clean (to the point where his violence is to "pull the day to pieces,") to get rid of all objects – that this should in the end begin with object and image creation again is the poem's most painful lesson. The objects in this poem, bottles, pots, shoes and grass, were all at one time instances, points of truth, referents, monads of truth. "The the" is again, the simplest beginning, any object, but an object, any point, but a definite, fixed point for the moment.

This poem becomes the "resolution" to "Sunday Morning" in that this poem finds for itself a new belief, no longer lost in tenuous darkness, but in objects that surround him.

Conclusion

Multiplicity of objects represents the multiplicity of truths in Stevens' work, and I think this happens in part because he could see resemblances everywhere. Each thing becomes something else, although the process of one thing becoming another also means that one has lost grasp onto one's old images. This is to feel both gain and loss at the same time, both entering into a new home and leaving an old.

In Stevens' poetry, the loss of a home, that is, the inability to understand a poem creates the suspension of time, which is also the state of suspended desire for that poem. This desire, or pull toward an obscure poem makes the reader treat it as if it were a solid object. Every moment when the poem evades us and disappoints our expectations, we are made to feel "less ourselves." This is ironic, because the less we become, the more we turn inwardly towards ourselves, and the more we are ourselves: I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

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