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In April 1997 Jonathan Levin visited the Department of Comparative Literature, Aarhus University, where he gave a series of lectures. Among these were "Wallace Stevens and the Pragmatist Imagination" and "Towards a Literary Ecology: The Literature of Place."

Wallace Stevens and the Pragmatist Imagination

The emphasis on process and relationality within the unfolding instant of perception forms a background to American literary modernists' efforts to represent the moment of transition between an available stock of familiar meanings and an emerging novelty that can potentially transform that stock of meanings. As if applying William James's definition of genius as "little more than the faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way," American literary modernists set out to cultivate habits of perceiving in unhabitual ways.¹ For Wallace Stevens, poetry would serve to refine and extend powers of perception. It is not, however, conceived in opposition to mere prose or to more explicitly practical or engaged forms of communication. Poetry is rather a means of cultivating possible forms of engaged experience as well as a more richly and diversely enlightened understanding of that experience. Poetry's vital integration of imagination and reality leads Stevens to embrace fiction, or poetic distortion, as an aspect of true understanding.

This essential feature of Stevens's pragmatist imagination is reflected in his defense of metaphor, as in these lines from "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together":

He had not to be told

Of the incredible subjects of poetry.
He was willing they should remain incredible,
Because the incredible, also, has its truth,
Its tuft of emerald that is real, for all
Its invitation to false metaphor.
The incredible gave him a purpose to believe.²

Stevens's willingness that the "incredible subjects of poetry" should "remain incredible" reflects his conviction that even in a modern, skeptical age, we depend on habits of knowledge and belief that exceed rational intelligence. He acknowledges that the "tuft of emerald"--a characteristic Stevensian figure for some irresistibly attractive object or belief--invites "false metaphor," or a distorted understanding of things. Yet he remains willing to engage that metaphor for the sake of the incredible and the "purpose to believe" it

establishes.

Like William James, who in "The Will to Believe" defended the right to adopt beliefs that may in the end prove false, Stevens considers this "purpose to believe" every bit as important to our cognitive life as the methods of rational investigation that aim at eliminating demonstrably false beliefs. What is unusual in Stevens's formulation is his refusal to separate rational and irrational processes. The incredible, which "also, has its truth," works together with the credible, even determining the latter's possibility. The incredible does not contradict belief or the will to believe, but instead generates a viable "purpose to believe." Stevens offers a gloss on these lines in his "Adagia," the epigrams he collected in a notebook: "The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support they give."³ The "tuft of emerald" is real not because it corresponds to anything in the world, which in a narrow sense it does not, but because of what it reveals and makes possible in this broader sense.

Stevens's defense of the incredible reflects his pragmatist belief that our ordinary conceptions are in fact a subtle and constantly evolving fusion of rational and imaginative elements. Stevens's poetry typically sets out to reveal the extraordinary dimension of the ordinary. More like Santayana than like Dewey, Stevens rarely seeks to apply rational intelligence to the problems of men, but rather explores the imaginative dimensions of human intelligence. It is precisely this sort of claim that has led some critics to classify Stevens as more essentially late Romantic than modernist.⁴ In one sense, this view is indisputable: Stevens was deeply influenced by the Romantics and often appropriated their vocabularies. But the affinities and borrowings often lead readers to underestimate Stevens's distinctive modernity, especially as it is conveyed through the dense obscurity of his language. Like Henry James and Gertrude Stein, Stevens makes elusiveness a positive virtue in his poems. This elusiveness marks a style of attentiveness to things that recognizes their dynamic relationship to unfolding, imaginative processes. If anything, Stevens's poetry makes it increasingly difficult to rest content with such classifications as "Romantic," "Modern," and "Avant-Garde." Stevens roams freely between such conceptions and by doing so, complicates our understanding of the relations between literature, imagination, and the real, historical world.⁵

One reason for the confusion about Stevens's modernist credentials is that critics have rarely understood his distinctive metaphors of transition.

Stevens is interested in the exchange between imagination and reality, an exchange so complete and fundamental that the terms themselves, in isolation, have no proper meaning. There is no imagination without reality, just as there is no reality without imagination. In "Imagination as Value," Stevens hesitates to aggrandize human imagination: "The romantic belittles [the imagination]. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty" (NA 138). To "make use" of the liberty of the mind would be to set it to work within concrete, material conditions.

Like the pragmatists, Stevens was skeptical of any effort to posit hidden or ideal realities somewhere behind the actual appearances and processes of the material, social world. From his religious skepticism in "Sunday Morning" to his recognition in "Esthétique du Mal" that "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world," Stevens felt that whatever the imagination could accomplish, it could only accomplish it through its engagement with the actualities and particularities of this world. He believed that literature was not "about" life, but that in an important sense, it made life. He copied into his commonplace book Henry James's comment in a letter to H. G. Wells that "art makes life, makes interest, makes importance," later citing the passage in his 1951 talk "The Relations between Poetry and Painting." He also copied a passage from James's notebook that he found in a review of F. O. Matthiessen's Henry James: The Major Phase: "To live in the world of creation--to get into it and stay in it--to frequent it and haunt it--to think intensely and fruitfully--to woo combinations and inspirations into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation--that is the only thing."⁶ These passages underscore James's characteristic effort to link the experience of writing with the world of experience.

In his poetry, Stevens dramatizes the same interrelation between the world and its ongoing realization in poetry. This interrelation is the subject of the famous anthology piece, "Anecdote of the Jar."

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.⁷

Dimly echoing Keats's urn, the jar is a static objet d'art, a bit ridiculous in its rural simplicity but nonetheless distinct as art from its surrounding environment. Indeed, wilderness and jar are set against each other here. The jar takes dominion by imposing its order on the scene. By actively placing the jar in the Tennessee wilderness, the speaker transforms that wilderness. The last lines of the poem bluntly state the gap that still remains between jar and environment: the jar, "gray and bare," did not "give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee."

Frank Lentricchia, drawing on a reference to the poem in Michael Herr's book on the war in Vietnam, Dispatches, writes of the jar's dominion as a kind of imperialistic aggression. Jars

seem to have designs upon power. They take dominion, they can even make something as unmanageable as a wilderness shape up, imitate their structural roundedness. A jar can make a wilderness surround itself; a jar can make the very ground into its mirror. Jars are humorless narcissists who think they are ungrounded.

Lentricchia further suggests that whereas Wordsworth and Keats could comfortably differentiate between an imposing socio-political/aesthetic order and their own poetry ("they might have said: 'The jar is them'"), Stevens could not. Unsentimental about democratic America, he concludes, and forces us to conclude, "'The jar is us.'"⁸

This somewhat overdetermines the poem, however, especially since Stevens seems delighted by the poem's scenario. "Anecdote of the Jar" is positively charming in its representation of the gulf between world and poem. This is an effect of rhyme, rhythm, diction, and tone, in short, of poetic form. "Anecdote of the Jar" is a masterful performance, a lot like the jar in its mastery. For the space of twelve charming lines, the poem effectively transforms the source of Stevens's most profound and recurrent anxiety--how valid are his meager poems, mere jars in the wilderness?--into a delightful display of confidence and wit. Stevens recognized that if his poems were, like the jar, arrogantly false and dominating representations of the world, the process of

writing them effected something altogether different. To write a poem is to exercise energies that are both entirely natural (like bird or bush, perfectly organic) and inventive of genuine differences (like nothing else in Tennessee). If the poem as a representation is a violent domination, the process of writing still cultivates fundamental and indispensable creative energies.

The argument of this poem turns on a set of animating paradoxes that together constitute the dynamic tension of Stevens's best poetry. I will reduce these paradoxes to two, one concerning the nature of the real, the other concerning language. Consider two contiguous "Adagia": "The ultimate value is reality," "Realism is a corruption of reality" (OP 192). Broadly speaking, realism in art and literature has reflected the impulse to isolate and represent what is most authentically real about the world, by which novelists and critics have generally meant the social, economic, or even sexual conditions of experience. But Stevens's aphorisms suggest that the effort to purify reality of all imagination is itself a delusion. The paradox about reality, for Stevens, is that to isolate and approach it, one has to recognize that it is always and inevitably intermixed with what we pejoratively call "illusion." Reality, Stevens's explicit ultimate value, is never simply the opposite of fiction or illusion: as he puts it in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396).

And just as, in the final analysis, reality depends, as Stevens will elsewhere say, on the unreal, so the impulse to purify language is met by an impulse to multiply words. "Anecdote of the Jar" suggests the limitations of language, and would almost seem to be a prelude to the rejection of language as a mechanism of domination, but for the poem's charming playfulness. In fact, even as he criticizes the limitations of language, Stevens exults in his powers of language. Naming is a dangerous business, full of risk and potential violence, but it is at the same time a wonderful game and a great chance, altogether sensuous, especially as an affair of sound. This is the second paradox, never quite resolved in Stevens: language functions as both an obstruction and a link to reality.

Stevens does not want his reader to decide between the real Tennessee wilderness and the jar's "gray and bare" Tennessee. These are false opposites that constitute a set of deeply intellectualist expectations about the world, that the "real" will be distinct from what is "illusory," "metaphorical," or "fictive." Stevens engages this language because the language has engaged him already--he is, in other words, never entirely beyond such false binaries--but the point of the poem is not to choose one side or the other but rather to recognize how the two sets of terms mutually determine one another. This is the poem's subject,

but it is also its effect. As readers, we can resist the temptation to decide for or against the jar. And it is this sort of elusiveness that confuses readers who come to Stevens's poems with expectations about definitive structures of meaning. "Anecdote of the Jar" stages a double-movement toward imposed orders that focus meanings and away from those orders toward details that are never fully assimilated into the poem's structure. The poem offers a view of the wilderness and at the same time reminds us of the constructedness of that view. It demonstrates the capacity of words to effect transitions from one view to another, without staging any given view as absolute or definitive.

A similar double movement is apparent in "The Idea of Order at Key West." The poem hardly conveys anything like a sense of an order that is a permanent, stable dimension of Key West, but rather explores a momentary sense of such order, and is as much about the precariousness of that sense as it is about the comfort or pleasure that derives from it.

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

The woman's song is powerful enough to create a sense that some spirit is at play, whether it is the spirit of the sea, her self, or some other source. The point of these lines, however, is not to identify or define that spirit but rather to suggest that the song raises the unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, question of the origins of that spirit, a question that "we should ask often . . . as she sang." The next stanza begins in Stevens's characteristic conditional voice-- "If it was only the dark voice of the sea / That rose . . ."--and, after proceeding through a number of options, ends with an accumulating sense that the spirit in question is "more" than anything the speaker has been able to figure:

But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea. (CP 129)

"Meaningless plungings" states the case rather frankly, that without the woman's song the sea has no cosmic significance beyond its perfectly mundane activity. But "theatrical distances" and the dramatic language that follows--

"bronze shadows heaped / On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea"--suggest that some kind of meaning is in fact being staged here. "It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing": the intensities described in the woman's song (and by extension, in the poem itself) are generated by this theatrical, singing voice.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" is about the "idea of order," not about order per se. The difference marks what is most distinctive about Stevens's pragmatist imagination. The idea of order does not correspond to something in Key West or to some ideal type or form indicated by Key West. It may not even outlast the song that is overheard or the poem that describes it. The poem's conclusion underscores this distinction between an inherent, unchanging order and the idea of order as poetry:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. (CP 130)

The effect here is much like the effect described in "Anecdote of the Jar." The lights of the boats, suffused as they are by the experience of the song, organize the scene, almost as constellations map the night sky. The last stanza moves from the star-like lights of the fishing boats to words themselves, which are also "dimly-starred" and which, like the fishing lights, reflect two distinct axes, one recognizable and mundane, almost realistic ("of ourselves and of our origins") and the other strange and haunting, almost fantastic or phantasmatic ("ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds"). The effect of these lines is to make it difficult to separate these axes from one another.

The trope of mastery on which the poem's conclusion turns marks the poem's most difficult movement. Stevens's singer appears to be imposing

authoritative form over heterogeneous materials. One is reminded of Stevens's later admonition in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "But to impose is not / To discover" (CP 403). But this reading simplifies a more complicated, more modulated response to the woman's song and to the view of the boats that the poem is also recording. Stevens himself frequently complains that all the old efforts to master the world are inadequate ("the solar chariot is junk," as he puts it in one poem), yet it is apparent that, under certain circumstances, nothing is more extraordinary than to have mastered, even if only tentatively, what had been pure chaos. Stevens would not have us choose between an enchanted cosmos and a disenchanted one, religious and secular world-views, or authoritarian mastery and liberated free-play, as if all enchantments were equal and all authority equally despicable. We inherit these oppositions as part of our reasoning about the world, but they are themselves profoundly inadequate to that world. The deeper, more elusive problem for Stevens is how to inhabit the world responsively without losing the world because of our response to it. Even as we familiarize the world in linguistic patterns, the poet recognizes the power of words to disrupt and reshape those patterns. Words constitute the familiarizing patterns as well as the transitional power to recast those patterns.

Stevens began developing a theory of poetry in his first major talk, his 1936 Harvard address, "The Irrational Element in Poetry." After staking poetry's claim to the territory of "the irrational," however, he rigorously avoided the term thereafter. Indeed, this would be the only major talk to be excluded from the 1951 collection of prose essays, The Necessary Angel. Stevens seems to have recognized the disservice the association of poetry and the irrational would do to his poetics. He wanted to make the rational and irrational permeable, but by highlighting the irrational in this way, he made it seem to be something separable from the rational. This is the basis of his criticism of the surrealists, and it likely accounts for his decision to exclude the essay from The Necessary Angel. After this first early talk, Stevens's descriptions of imagination and reality would turn on various tropes suggesting interdependence. The composition the following year of The Man with the Blue Guitar constitutes Stevens's major breakthrough in this regard: "things as they are," in the vocabulary of the poem, are constantly transposed on the poet's "blue guitar." The sequence cycles between two extremes: "The earth is not earth but a stone" (CP 173) and "The world washed in his imagination" (CP 179). The 33 sections of the poem develop variations on the theme of the mutual inherence of imagination and reality. The balance tips in each direction through the course of the sequence, but the larger drift of the sequence is to suggest that no single description of the relation between

imagination and world can be definitive. The Man with the Blue Guitar is the first of Stevens's many successful sequence poems composed in two- or three-line stanzas, a form he would pass on to such poets as A. R. Ammons, William Bronk, and Mark Strand.

"Two things of opposite natures seem to depend," the fourth poem of the second section of another of Stevens's major sequences, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," describes this interdependence.

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple
And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body.

In solitude the trumpets of solitude
Are not of another solitude resounding;
A little string speaks for a crowd of voices.

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
The child that touches takes character from the thing,
The body, it touches. The captain and his men

Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
Sister and solace, brother and delight. (CP 392)

Two things "of opposite natures" should logically be separable, yet Stevens figures their qualities here as mutually dependent. Somehow, "the particulars of rapture" hinge on this mutual inherence of opposite natures or terms. The

metaphors here are even explicitly sexual, playing on the apparent opposition of man and woman and on the mutuality implicit in their embrace. The experience Stevens describes is not a logical one: "Music falls on the silence like a sense, / A passion that we feel, not understand." Nothing can explain a responsive rapture, but it is not any less rapturous because it can not be explained. By the end of the poem, boundaries are being blurred everywhere, so that identity becomes a function not of autonomous selfhood, but rather of the contexts that mediate and shape the formation of any self: "The partaker partakes of that which changes him." Stevens insists on the subtle effect of physical touch, suggesting that the child who touches objects in her environment takes her own character from "the thing, / The body, it touches." This is one of Stevens's most perfectly Whitmanesque passages, from the moment of the child's touch to the end of the poem: "Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight." The address to the reader, like Whitman's address in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," is an acknowledgement that the poem itself, in this case Stevens's "Notes," has become a part of the reader's living context. What seemed opposite, a writer and a reader, is recognized here as strangely but altogether concretely interrelated.

For Stevens, poetry is a means to realize identity as a series of open-ended, unfolding relations. Stevens's poetry represents things as they are irreducibly suffused by processes of imagining. Nor is there any one definitive or ideal imagination of things in Stevens's poetry. Everything in the world of Stevens's poetry is in transition because imagination is an implicitly unfinished process. Hence what in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Stevens calls "this endlessly elaborating poem." But this perpetual multiplication of meanings is also the source of a peculiar irony, for Stevens has set himself the unenviable task of creating a vocabulary for something that, in his own words from the first section of "Notes," "never could be named." This is a point to which Stevens returns, one way or other, repeatedly in his talks. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," for example, he comments on the elusiveness of the figure of nobility: "Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly. There is a shame of disclosing it and in its definite presentations a horror of it. But there it is." This leads Stevens to comment that he is "evading a definition": "If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed" (NA 34). To evade a definition is to leave an element of possibility active in the thing not

being defined. But what can it mean to "show it to you unfixed"? What is a figure of nobility if it can only be represented as "an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes"? Certainly the structure of the essays, with their restless movement from source to source, their progress not by logical argumentation but by pulses of thought, represents one strategy for keeping the subject unfixed.

Still, Stevens's ambivalence about his prose--where he seems to have felt acutely the burden of description--is often apparent, nowhere more so than in the short "Introduction" he wrote for The Necessary Angel. "Obviously," the second paragraph of the "Introduction" begins, "they are not the carefully organized notes of systematic study" (NA vii). Stevens must have been anxious to make this clear from the start, since he had to know that his effort to articulate a theory of imagination had run up against the problem of having to organize or systematize a mode of perception that, by virtue of its double allegiance to the realistic and the imaginative, resisted systematic organization. Stevens comments further on in the "Introduction," after describing his ambition to write a theory of poetry, "The few pages that follow are, now, alas! the only realization possible to me of those excited ambitions" (NA viii).

These ambivalences reflect something quite central to Stevens's poetic imagination, the gap between the ambition of poetry and the reality of poems. To some extent, this is a product of Stevens's Emersonian ambition. It was Emerson, after all, who commented in "Fate" that "every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit."⁹ The rather obvious problem with imagination is that its projections may impose themselves, like the jar in Tennessee, all too successfully. In his "Essays on Reality and the Imagination," the subtitle of The Necessary Angel, Stevens is everywhere anxious to balance the claims of both realms, as a safeguard against this effect of confinement. And so he proposes definitions that will ideally be self-consuming. Here is how Stevens finally describes the essays in the "Introduction": "to their extent they are a realization; and it is because that is true, that is to say, because they seem to me to communicate to the reader the portent of the subject, if nothing more, that they are presented here" (NA viii). Stevens's definition is fraught with nervous qualifiers: "to their extent," "seem to me," "if nothing more." Somewhere between the ideal of anticipation and the disappointment of actualization falls the "portent of the subject," not quite the subject itself, it would seem, but a fair enough approach to it, enough, at least, to indicate what it would be if it could be named.

Stevens's ongoing defense of imagination should be understood in light of these ambivalences. Stevens almost never invokes imagination in his prose

without first qualifying it, indicating that any imagination not grounded in reality and answerable to it is not worth having: "The real is only the base. But it is the base," as one of the "Adagia" has it (OP 187). "The interest of life," he writes in another "Adagia," "is experienced by participating and by being part, not by observing nor by thinking" (OP 200). Or: "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (OP 201). Poetry belongs to life in its most ordinary contexts, and anything that detaches it from that life and those contexts drains it of its vitality. These comments indicate one important aspect of Stevens's poetics, his sense that imagination for its own sake, or for the sake of establishing a poetic universe outside the universe of ordinary experience or of actual fact, is an empty ideal.

But for all this apparent realism, to engage the real is also for Stevens to engage the ideas that we invariably form of the real. William James comments provocatively in "The Will to Believe" on the absurdity of our single-minded devotion to truth: "Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says 'Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!' merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe." James concludes: "Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf."¹⁰ Nietzsche would say much the same thing, right down to the necessary "lightness of heart," though he would say it in thunder, as if only he were strong enough to stand the truth about truth. What James and Nietzsche share is the sense that there is a tyranny of truth that is itself more deeply and dangerously "false" than the beliefs people tentatively adopt that may, in the end, need to be revised. Stevens's poet may also grind out falsehood, but that falsehood is, at least, always attuned to the need to remain open to further revision, much as intelligence, for Dewey, requires what in Reconstruction in Philosophy he called "constant alertness in observing consequences, an open-minded will to learn and courage in re-adjustment."¹¹

Stevens's pragmatist imagination takes this constant alertness to a new level. By "consequences," Dewey means changes in physical or social properties. The "will to learn" and "courage in re-adjustment" refer to one's ability to assume the risks and uncertainties associated with the processes of intellectual and social transformation. For Stevens, consequences cannot be located so definitely in the external world. This is because an attentive eye will see transition and its unfolding consequences everywhere. Dewey deconstructs the opposition between internal (conscious) and external (physical and social) realms in order to locate the conscious self in the world of impinging realities.

Stevens also deconstructs this opposition, but with more of an eye to complicating our sense of what is internal and what is external. Where Dewey folds mind back into the world, Stevens weaves his way in and around and across the always permeable, impossible boundary between mind and world.

Stevens's prose can be disappointing, in part because he is always bumping his head against the limitations of his key terms, reality and imagination. However savvy he may be in his use of these terms, the terms never take him very far. His poetry, though, is another matter altogether. "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream," which first appeared in the 1947 Transport to Summer, is a delightfully strange poem that incorporates these tensions, weaving and unweaving the fabric of a world with astonishing confidence and ease. The poem describes an outing to a local stream, where the activity of swimming is mixed indiscriminately with the poet's perception of light and color and shape playing around and apparently on the stream.

It was like passing a boundary to dive
Into the sun-filled water, brightly leafed
And limbed and lighted out from bank to bank.

That's how the stars shine during the day. There, then,
The yellow that was yesterday, refreshed,
Became to-day, among our children and

Ourselves, in the clearest green--well, call it green.
We bathed in yellow green and yellow blue
And in these comic colors dangled down,

Like their particular characters, addicts
To blotches, angular anonymids
Gulping for shape among the reeds. No doubt,

We were the appropriate conceptions, less
Than creatures, of the sky between the banks,
The water flowing in the flow of space.

It was passing a boundary, floating without a head
And naked, or almost so, into the grotesque
Of being naked, or almost so, in a world

Of nakedness, in the company of the sun,
Good-fortuner of the grotesque, patrolon,
A funny foreigner of meek address.

How good it was at home again at night
To prepare for bed, in the frame of the house, and move
Round the rooms, which do not ever seem to change . . .

(CP 371-72)

The guiding trope of this poem is the initial figure of "passing a boundary." There is a literal boundary, constituted by the water's actual surface, but the poem also describes a figurative boundary, on the other side of which all that is solid melts. Stevens begins immediately to confuse the different physical spaces of the poem. The surface of the water in particular functions not as a strict boundary, but as a surface at once transparent and opaque, allowing simultaneous perception of what is in the water, on its surface, both in and out (like the swimmers themselves), and, by reflection, above and around it. The water is "sun-filled," even though the sun is supposedly outside the water, and is "brightly leafed / And limbed" despite its apparent separation from the surrounding banks.

The oddest passage in the poem is the one in which the speaker and his companions are reduced to aspects of the physical geography, of the play of light and color on and in the river. These are strangely depersonalized people, "appropriate conceptions" of a physical geography that is itself reduced to a shapeless play of light, color, reflection, and motion. No wonder Stevens calls them "angular anonymids / Gulping for shape among the reeds," underscoring the erasure of identity which they undergo in the poem/stream. To adopt such form, or to escape in such ways from form, is to become the "appropriate conception" of place so formless that it will hardly stand still to be described: "the sky between the banks, / The water flowing in the flow of space." It is as though the speaker imagines himself in a modern painting and attributes to the others and to himself as much "humanity" as a figure in such a painting would have, which is to say none at all. The image of "floating without a head" probably refers to an actual appearance, a reflection on the surface, say, or bodies partly submerged, but it also suggests the temporary relaxation of reason on which the poem depends. One must suspend the tyrannous forms of knowledge in order to comprehend everything that such knowledge obscures-- here, a fluidity of identity that opens the speaker to the radical otherness of his world. The "grotesque / Of being naked, or almost so" captures the

strangeness of what is in fact seen the other side of such knowledge. Stevens sometimes uses the term "comic" in this sense, as in "these comic colors dangling down," suggesting the uninhibited delight of color and shape and motion as they precede organization into recognizable and meaningful form.

Interestingly, Stevens returns, in the poem's last stanza, to such an organized space. The "frame of the house" suggests a kind of intellectual and even moral framing. While movement in the stream promotes a sense of the finality of change, movement in the house provides the illusion of permanence. Everything turns on the tone of "seem," which quietly underscores the speaker's recognition that the frame provided by the house is as illusory and finally irrelevant as human identity had seemed in the stream. The ellipses, an infrequent typographical ploy with Stevens, underscores this sense, as if announcing the change still to come. But there is also warmth and recognition in this stanza. It is good to return home after such disjunctive visions, and good to feel some confidence, however qualified, in the relative stability of a home.

Like other poems by Stevens, "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream" is an effort to get into words certain perceptions that exceed the organizing and rationalizing tendency of words. Only a proliferation of language can counter the reductive effect of language and form: more language, and more rhetorical play, to suggest the "more" of all identity. Rather than seek to minimize language, or to purify it, as a means of resisting its distortions, as if some simple reality or identity really did abide beneath the encrustations of language, Stevens writes to multiply linguistic effects. Hence, not, for Stevens, an ideal of simple nakedness, but rather a "grotesque / Of being naked, or almost so." Language does not aim at accuracy of representation but rather indicates a perpetual play of form and formal rupture. The poem stages our irreducible relation to these transitional processes.

Stevens everywhere reminds his reader that fictions about the world cannot simply be erased or avoided. Indeed, fictions only seem avoided when one fiction has been successfully naturalized. This is when people speak with the greatest assurance about what is real, natural, or true. When any received fiction dominates, it does so by attaining the status of truth. The alternative is not a truth that rigorously eschews the mechanisms of fiction, but rather proliferating fictions that resist being taken as truths. For Stevens, there is an intricate complication at the heart of all of these categories--the real, the natural, the true--a complication that stems from the mixed condition of fact and fiction. Consider another "Adagia": "To live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it" (OP 190). To live by "existing conceptions" of the world

would not be to live in the world, but there is no way simply to step apart from those existing conceptions into the world pure and simple. Hence, in Stevens's most significant reversal, to live in the world is also to live in poems, and in ways that make the dichotomy increasingly hard to uphold.

Poetry, for Stevens, is an extended inquiry into new possibilities of transition. Stevens's poetry attempts to think beyond the received imperatives of thinking. It is not clear that he ever succeeds, or that it is even possible wholly to succeed, but the effort led him to compose an extraordinarily challenging body of poetry. Writing in canto XXII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens suggests that an imaginative reduction can serve as the basis for a further imaginative investment:

To re-create, to use

The cold and earliness and bright origin
Is to search. (CP 481)

Stevens's "cold," "earliness," and "bright origin" are all tropes for the will to clear away false or tired imaginative ideals, while his verbs--"To re-create, to use," "to search"--remind the reader that this return is not designed to achieve a state of settled repose but rather to initiate or extend an already unfolding process. In this spirit, Stevens appropriates the "evening star," a figure sedimented with conventional associations, as the material for still further discovery:

Likewise to say of the evening star,
The most ancient light in the most ancient sky,

That it is wholly an inner light, that it shines
From the sleepy bosom of the real, re-creates,
Searches a possible for its possibleness. (CP 481)

Stevens muddies the classic distinction between origins and ends, as well as between internal (subjective) and external (objective) realms. The "evening star" is "wholly an inner light," but it shines "From the sleepy bosom of the real." The figure of the star is intended to complicate our usual sense that these are separable realms. More importantly, once we realize their mutual inherence, the figure of the evening star "re-creates, / Searches a possible for its possibleness."

Stevens's pragmatist imagination reaches a fever pitch in its vigilance to "search a possible for its possibleness." He is never more opaque and bewildering than when he is seeking to tease out or intensify his perception of the mutual inherence of imagination and reality. It is a process of continuous re-creation because the received imaginings of things--whether ancient mythologies, conventional poetic associations, or long-dominant metaphors--ultimately obstruct one's relation to the world. The old imaginings limit the play of imagination over things. For Stevens, poetry is the realization of the latent possibility in things, so long as that realization does not fix that possibility. To "search a possible for its possibleness" is to replace settled identifications, definitions, intentions, and designs with the open-ended unfolding of possibility as realized in the indeterminate, transitional play of verbal implication, association, suggestion, tone, or acoustic and imagistic juxtaposition.

Stevens repeatedly stages the destruction of some old form of imagination and the new beginning that the imagination undertakes in its place. Consider the first poem of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," in which Stevens writes,

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CP 380).

The sun is seen clearly only in "the idea of it," which is the idea formed of it once all the false and distorted ideas of it have been washed away. It is an imagined sun, but a sun imagined without the mediation of its old imaginings: "Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named" (CP 381). What makes this new idea of the sun different is that it is not so much imagined, as it is being imagined. The process of imagining is going on in, or as, the poem itself.

In all of these examples, Stevens describes a world that is situated so exactly at the point where imagination and reality meet that we can neither possess nor, paradoxically enough, even describe that world. Stevens writes from the leading edge of unfolding transitions, the edge where novelty emerges and reconstructs habitual patterns of perception and understanding. Stevens's poetry begins in what might be called a dis-imagination of things that is indistinguishable from their re-imagination. Most importantly, Stevens never offers a definitive imagination of things. In this regard, Canto XXXII of The Man with the Blue Guitar stands as one of the central poems in Stevens's canon:

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.

How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you. (CP 183)

This is one of Stevens's earliest invitations to the reader to become an "ignorant man" by suspending the vocabularies and conceptual paradigms that mediate between us and our world. As ever, once these mediations are rejected, imagination is still present on the scene: "The blue guitar surprises you." Phrasings like "the madness of space" and "its jocular procreations" hardly suggest the bareness of an unimagined, plain or natural world. As Stevens peels away the encrusted layers of past imaginings, he finds not the naked world, but the mad and jocular play of imaginative energies.

Of course, the problem remains that every poem, by giving form to those energies, also limits and reduces them. Stevens never resolves this problem, though he does embrace the tensions to which it gives rise. One of his last poems, "The Planet on the Table," will serve to exemplify these tensions, as well as to underscore the animating paradoxes implicit in Stevens's attitudes to poetry and language:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun

Were waste and welter
And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part. (CP 532-33)

The "planet on the table" probably refers to the manuscript of Stevens's Collected Poems. Holly Stevens dates the composition of the poem to 1953, probably around the time Stevens began to gather his poems for the 1954 collected edition. In the poem, the speaker is pleased to recognize that his poems are the product of both "his self" and "the sun." In the last two stanzas, he expresses his willingness to entertain the destruction of his poems, in which case they would only be following the sun's "other makings." Everything is "waste and welter" in this world. Still, for all their impermanence, the poems might bear some vital trace of the life they responded to and intensified. The words themselves will always display a certain "poverty," a bareness that sets them off from life itself, but they may, at the same time, convey some "lineament or character, / Some affluence, if only half-perceived" that belongs as much to the planet as to the poet, reflecting and extending the creative processes that encompass and subsume poets and their collected poems.

Affluence and poverty: these conflicting terms mark Stevens's sense of the abiding, animating paradox of the pragmatist imagination. There is no transcendence that finally overcomes our human poverty, but also no purely reductive condition that utterly defeats the irresistible play of imagination. There is an affluence that abides even in the poet's most reductive words and that coexists with their essential poverty. Better that this affluence remain only half-perceived, since to perceive it whole might be to neglect the poverty of words, to mistake their occasional and uncertain glimmering for complete illumination. Stevens's poetics of transition is a poetics of such half-perceptions: the transitions are still in the making, partial and tentative, but

always actively unfolding. Such words do not create final satisfactions, but they can orient us toward the endless satisfaction of creative activity. "Alpha continues to begin," as Stevens puts it in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "Omega is refreshed at every end" (CP 469).

Endnotes

¹ William James, The Principles of Psychology, 3 vols., ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 2: 757.

² Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (1951; New York: Vintage, 1965) 85. Further references to this text appear parenthetically as NA.

³ Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, rev. ed., ed. Milton J. Bates (1957; New York: Vintage, 1990) 186. Further references to this text appear parenthetically as OP.

⁴ While there is wide agreement about Stevens's Romantic inheritance, there is little agreement about just what that inheritance is or how it affects his poetic modernism. Harold Bloom, in Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (1976; Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) and in various essays on Stevens that have appeared in his many volumes of criticism, has provided the most forceful (and eccentric) account of Stevens's Romantic inheritance, offering especially illuminating comparisons to Emerson and Whitman. Marjorie Perloff also associates Stevens's poetics with Romantic and symbolist traditions, though she highlights the ways in which this background compromises Stevens's modernity and differentiates him from the anti-lyrical avant-garde. See Perloff's essays, "Pound/Stevens: whose era?," originally published in New Literary History in 1982 and reprinted in The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 1-32 and "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," in Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 41-64.

⁵ The major critical trend among scholars of Stevens's poetry in the 1990s has, not surprisingly, been to examine Stevens's relation to historical reality. See especially Alan Filreis, Wallace Stevens and the Actual World (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) and Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), as well as James Longenbach, Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

⁶ Stevens, Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book, ed. Milton J. Bates (Stanford and San Marino: Stanford UP and Huntington Library, 1989) 77; 81; NA 169.

⁷ Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems (1954; New York: Knopf, 1995) 76. Further references to this text appear parenthetically as CP.

⁸ Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988) 14-15; 20.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays and Lectures, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983) 946.

¹⁰ William James, Writings 1878-1899, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992) 469-70.

¹¹ John Dewey, The Middle Works, 1899-1924, 15 vols., ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1976-1983) 12: 135