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**Wallace Stevens' "Orchestration" of "The Whole of  
Harmonium"**

**Comins, Barbara, Ph.D.**

**City University of New York, 1994**

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WALLACE STEVENS' "ORCHESTRATION" OF  
"THE WHOLE OF HARMONIUM"

by

BARBARA COMINS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for  
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## Table of Contents

I. Prelude: "Frettings on the Blank": .....	1
II. "Score this Anecdote" .....	16
III. "Jocular Procreations" .....	40
IV. "A Million People on One String" .....	72
V. "Invisible Audience" .....	97
VI. "Then the Theatre Changed" .....	125
VII. "Like a Page of Music" .....	158
VIII. "Silent Rhapsodist" .....	182
IX. Coda: "Transcendent Analogue" .....	213
Works Cited.....	217
Bibliography.....	224

## I. Prelude: "Frettings on the Blank"

The order of the spirit is the only music of the spheres:  
 or rather, the only music.  
 (Wallace Stevens *LWS* 403)

In one of his letters, the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) noted that he was "very keen about Rosen[k]avalier, especially the music of the presentation of the silver rose": "[T]he glancing chords haunt me and sometimes I try to reproduce the effect of them in words" (*LWS* 744). Stevens' word, "glance," to describe the chords is naturally synaesthetic, conjuring up both touch and sight. A "glancing blow" is one that strikes obliquely but hits its mark, nevertheless, just as these chords ricochet through various inversions (displacements of their basic root position), dancing above a held tone before they land harmoniously like one of Stevens' "liquid cats."

In *Rosenkavalier*, the exotic effect of Richard Strauss's (1864-1949) chords is made even more magical through their orchestration. "Straussian orchestration, even at its softest, is seldom pure; two colors forever blend into a third, you're never sure who is doing what" (Rorem 159). Strauss assigns the chords to the combined colors of the harp, celeste, flute, piccolo, and three violins.

So linked are the ideas of color and orchestral timbre, that *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians*, vintage 1924, contains no entry under the rubric "orchestration," but rather describes the orchestrator's art in terms of "orchestral colour" (H.J. Wood 362).

Orchestral colour, which is vital to orchestral music, is difficult to treat in a short article, not only because it is at once an intricate and a very large subject but also because it has an indefiniteness. The parallelism with painting implied by its name is incomplete. The painter's primary material consists of three colours, red, blue, and yellow. When he mixes them a thousand varieties of hue result, but, for all their variety, they result definitely and in obedience to fixed rules. The maker of orchestral music may be said to work with four primaries, the strings and harp, the wood-wind instruments, the brass and the percussion instruments, these last including bells. But when he blends his primaries his results are not definite. The spacing of a chord, its doubling and its distribution among the classes of instruments can be so endlessly modified that to reach a fixed result regularly is hopeless. It is well known that some of our most experienced writers for the modern orchestra cannot hear what they write with the mind's ear. Hence the so frequent remark, "I had no idea it would sound so well."

If, as John Dewey says, "Ideas have color" (118), then Wallace Stevens' orchestral palette displays nature's infinite spectrum. He underscores idea, character, emotion, and spirit in his poems through use of musical allusion, rhythm, tonality, color, instrumentation, and other techniques of orchestration. Stevens depicts mood through musical effects and dynamics (*pizzicato*, *crescendo*, *accelerando*); foreshadows ideas of later poems through use of musical jokes, quotes and allusions; characterizes personality type through assignment of specific musical instruments or voice timbre; underscores the themes of certain poems by casting them within the framework of such musical forms as madrigal, bagatelle, mass, hymn, or waltz; and identifies specific emotions through musical tonality or key signature, as in

his employment of the optimistic sound of C Major to portray "major man," an embracing of the core of our enduring spirit.

In fact, John Hollander points out that "The whole of 'The Whole of Harmonium' is a musical trope, but it is a kind of master trope of such complexity that merely to catalogue its elements can be bewildering" (133), suggestively touching upon the idea of orchestration in passing. Cueing us in to the musical overtones in his poetry, Stevens had originally intended to call his *Collected Poems*, "The Whole of Harmonium" (LWS 834), evoking not only the homely keyboard instrument used in American churches and dwellings in place of the more costly and less portable organ, but also underscoring his elaboration of the Symbolist project, the attempt to "find a way of transposing the symphony to the Book" in order "to gather and preserve the riches of the spirit" (Mallarmé 42, 54). "Symphony," for Stevens, metaphorically expresses the complex harmony of the richly colored human spirit as he draws upon an array of musical instruments from "high-brow" harp to "honky-tonk" piano. He incorporates these instruments, hoping to find "the actual voices of our actual spirits" (LWS 659).

Stevens follows the lead of the Symbolists and Mallarmé, who felt that the poet must "actively create...as we would music on the keyboard, turning the pages of a score" (27), not only infusing his poetry with this air of musical improvisation but coloring it with novel orchestrations. Benamou writes that "Mallarmé's ambition to rival music with words has been much misunderstood: music for him...was a way of dispensing with symbols" (xv). Mallarmé, in "Richard Wagner: Réverie d'un Poète Français,"

lauded Wagner's "combination of all the arts," his "new means of evocation," and claimed that:

...the theatrical miracle which these arts perform will be motionless and insubstantial in an entirely new sense. We must undergo a spell. And if that spell is to be woven, we must accept every available means of enchantment which the magic of music offers, so that our reason may be defeated when it is at grips with a symbol. (74)

Wagner's "fusion of the arts" was also praised by Barrett Wendell, Wallace Stevens' composition teacher at Harvard. Wendell impressed upon his students the value of Wagner's "indefinable power of ... endlessly interwoven melody by which he seeks to express...the thought and emotion for which poetry alone is an inadequate vehicle" (279). Wagner, in *The Art Work of the Future*, contended that the "inner man can only find *direct* communication through the ear, and that by means of *his voice's* tone." The composer claimed, "Tone is the immediate utterance of feeling and has its physical seat within the heart, whence start and whither flow the waves of life-blood" (91).

Taking cues from Mallarmé and Wagner, Stevens recognized that the best poems often function on a "protosemiotic" level, a "nonsymbolic, nonreferential level of communication that predominates in music" (Burrows 13). By thus thrusting us into a primary sensory mode, Stevens' poems effect a disorientation of the senses (a Rimbaud-like "délablement de tous les sens") that frequently conflates them. His intense synaesthesia is an extension of the Symbolist mode, recalling Baudelaire's "*Correspondances*:  
"Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants, /Doux comme

les hautbois...".<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire's musical allusion uses synaesthesia as simple comparison --"skin as sweet as the sound of oboes." Stevens' musical allusions perplex and enlighten through, what I term, "synaptic synaesthesia," a difficult mental acrobatics of category-leaping common in his poetry:

..."The sibilance of phrases is his  
Or partly his. His voice is audible,  
As the fore-meaning in music is." (CP 485)  
[or]  
...transparencies of sound,  
Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self," (CP  
466)

In part, these phrases refer to the logic of a musical melody's gravitation toward its tonic resolution. Were a melody to be played to its penultimate note, the sense of its structure would dictate its final cadence. Intuitively understanding the melody's shape, even a non-musician would be able to supply the missing note. Stevens complicates and elaborates the Symbolist aesthetic with deeper musical allusions.

Stevens' metaphors heighten the spectrum of synaesthesia which normally involves describing one sense in terms of another: F. Scott Fitzgerald's "yellow cocktail music" in The Great Gatsby, or the musical idiom of "the blues" which takes synaesthesia one step further by describing an emotional mood in terms of a color. For example, he interpolates the mind as the unseen force of the weather, comparing its intangible force to "a cloud-cap in the corner of a looking-glass" (CP 531). If for him, weather is

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<sup>1</sup>Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) 47-86. Benamou refers to the synaesthesia in "*Correspondances*" as "the rather trite device of synesthesia" (55).

frequently an operative metaphor for mind, music, which touches us so deeply, is often his paradigm for the spirit. Musical sound allies itself closely with the spiritual because it "often issues from a location hidden within the source" and is quite "literally disembodiment, an emanation from the bodies producing it that leaves their materiality and concentrated localization behind" (Burrows 20).

Stevens' attachment to the Symbolist tradition<sup>2</sup> is reflected in his idea that readers should attend to the sounds in his poems rather than attach specific meanings, saying of "The Emperor of Ice Cream," "the point of that poem is not its meaning" (LWS 500). In fact, this poem was one of Stevens' personal favorites because of its "essential gaudiness" (LWS 263), accenting his delight in the magic of acoustical play. Sheer sound also reigns in his poem, "Domination in Black," upon which Stevens commented:

I am sorry that a poem of this sort has to contain any ideas at all, because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images and sounds that it contains. A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it. You are supposed to get heavens full of the colors and full of the sounds, and you are supposed to feel as you would feel if you actually got all this. (LWS 251)

To one of his correspondents he wrote, "All the interest that you feel in occasional frivolities I seem to experience in sounds, and many lines exist because I enjoy their clickety-clack in contrast with the more decorous pom-pom-pom that people expect" (LWS 485). Again underscoring the importance of orchestration in his

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<sup>2</sup>Michel Benamou's *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) elaborates upon this theme.

poetry, he said of "The curtains in the House of the Metaphysician," "long motions" and "long open sounds" were "part of the structure of the poem" (*LWS* 463).

For Stevens, music transports us "beyond the genius of the sea [see]" (*CP* 128). It functions as a "transcendent analogue" (*NA* 130), a way of scoring intuitive understanding: "Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands,/ The vivid thing in the air that never changes,/ Though the air change" (*CP* 238). His phrase, "the palm at the end of the mind" (*OP* 141), celebrates the position of instinct beyond the intellect:

When we hear the music of one of the great narrative musicians, as it tells its tale, it is like finding our way through the dark not by the aid of any sense but by an instinct that makes it possible for us to move quickly when the music moves quickly, slowly when the music moves slowly. (*NA* 126)

"Peter Quince at the Clavier" plays upon this theme of the emotive power of music.

Just as my fingers on these keys  
Make music, so the selfsame sounds  
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;

Pervading the poem is the acute awareness that one human being can touch a chord in another through the sonic seduction of words. However, music's ability to touch beyond the skin has a negative parallel in the poem's embedded rendition of the Apocryphal Susanna tale. Susanna's privacy at her bath is violated by the elders, just as our privacy is invaded daily by "boom boxes," an appropriate metaphorical term for loud radios that do violence, intruding upon the quiet thoughts of our private world. Thus, the

concept that music can "touch" intimately ("Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings...") is connected in this poem with the notion of our lack of acoustical privacy.

Stevens recognized the technological assault on privacy and the damage it does to modern man's spirit. When he writes about "the...American state of life in the eighties, the nineties and the first ten years of the next century," it seems as though he is describing conditions today, rather than at the turn of the last century:

The way we live and the way we work alike cast us out on reality. ...We no longer live in homes but in housing projects... It is not only that there are more of us and that we are actually close together. We are close together in every way. We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen, and unhappily, they are intimate with us. ...As for the workers, it is enough to say that...they have become, at their work, in the face of the machines, something approximating an abstraction, an energy. ...For more than ten years now, there has been an extraordinary pressure of news--let us say, news incomparably more pretentious than any description of it, news, at first, of the collapse of our system, or, call it, of life; then of news of a new world, but of a new world so uncertain that one did not know anything whatever of its nature, and does not know now...(NA 18, 20)

The poet needs to combat the assaulting din of technology's "crash[ing] symbols" and "roaring horns" (CP 91) with the "motive music of his poems" (NA 130). In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens remarked, "There is no element more conspicuously absent from contemporary poetry than nobility" (NA 35). Poets must listen for the voice of "nobility": "Its voice is

one of the inarticulate voices which it is their business to overhear and record" (*NA* 35).

Following Emerson, Stevens was well aware that a change in language from one generation to another is a change in outlook: "A variation between the sound of words in one age and the sound of words in another age is an instance of the pressure of reality" (*NA* 13). He claimed, "I cannot say there is any way to adapt myself to the idea that I am living in the Atomic Age and I think it is a lot of nonsense to try to adapt oneself to such a thing" (*LWS* 839). He sensed that "at [his] moment, the world [was] passing from the fatalism stage to an indifferent stage: a stage in which the primary sense is a sense of helplessness" (*LWS* 350). Commenting on the planter passage from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," an echo of Voltaire's admonishment to tend our own garden, Stevens wrote about the simple power of music:

...for all the changes, for all the increases, accessions, magnifyings, what often means most to us, and what, in a great extreme, might mean most to us is just as likely as not to be some little thing like a banjo's twang. (*LWS* 435)

Stevens strove constantly for "the mysterious effect of music, the vague effect we feel when we hear music, without ever defining it" (*LWS* 136). Music, for him, seemed the perfect paradigm for the ineffable emotional and spiritual feelings that touch our core. Moreover, Stevens' underlying compositional strategy was musical. In one of his early letters, he describes how he came upon "an expression about rhyme being 'an instrument of music'" (*LWS* 157). He felt that "the words to be rhymed should not only sound

alike, but... should enrich and deepen and enlarge each other, like two harmonious notes" (*LWS* 157). Accordingly, in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens requires the reader to hold the word "melody" (*CP* 90) with the mind's sostenuto pedal until the actual rhyming word "memory" (*CP* 92) strikes our ear during the penultimate line of the poem.

Often in a Stevens' poem, words resonate simultaneously like notes of a chord, producing a fresh sonority by a unique blending of overtones: "The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord" (*LWS* 363). As a musical colorist, Stevens said, "Personally, I like words to sound wrong" (*LWS* 340). Thus, he would use a word like "tournamonde" (*CP* 476), blending two French words as an orchestrator blends two instruments to produce a new feeling, a new sensation. He said that he created this "neologism" because:

...it creates an image of a world in which things revolve... Curiously, this word, to which I paid considerable attention when I used it, originated in my mind, in the word mappemond. I then got around to tournemonde, which would be a French neologism and I then changed it arbitrarily to tournamonde. I think that the word justifies itself in the sense of conveying an immediate, even though rather vague, meaning. Mallarmé said that poetry was made of words. (*LWS* 698-699)

Stevens intended his reader to do an acoustical double-take, to think his neologisms already part of the language. He felt the poet's duty was to be so impressionable and responsive to the needs of his time that he could expand language to include finer gradations of "the colors of mind" (*CP* 466) and spirit. He realized

that we orchestrate reality with the colors of our words, "...dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons" (*CP* 487).

You can compose in whatever form you like...It matters immensely. The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters. You can do as you please, yet everything matters....You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how...What is true of sounds is true of everything: the feeling for words, without regard to their sound, for example. There is in short, an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning.<sup>3</sup>

Stevens' relationship with music began early and included childhood memories of his "mother's absorbed, detached way" of playing hymns. As a young man at Harvard, he played the guitar...badly. Later, he married Elsie Kachel Moll, who had earned money demonstrating sheet music in a music store by playing the piano. He was an avid record collector (see Michael O. Stegman) and concertgoer. In fact, one of the last entries in his collected letters describes his excitement in anticipation of hearing the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra:

The Berlin orchestra plays here on Friday evening. I expect to go with Holly. It will be our last concert, here in Hartford, for the season, and I look forward to it, not merely out of curiosity, but because in a world so largely undisciplined the music of this orchestra will be music from the very center of discipline. (*LWS* 877)

Stevens was a well-educated listener. Margaret Powers, the wife of his business associate and friend, James Powers, related her experience attending a concert with her husband and Stevens:

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<sup>3</sup>Wallace Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry" in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1966) 226.

I was so surprised that he knew so much about music, the form of a fugue and that sort of thing. He was very familiar with whatever we were hearing that night, and he said, "Now you watch that theme; it's coming up later." (Brazeau 89)

Stevens listened critically to music and was pleased, when attending a Concertgebouw Orchestra concert, that its performance of a Haydn Symphony turned out not to have "any of the metronomic stiffness which makes Haydn a bit of an affliction" (LWS 854). His keen familiarity with orchestral music increased his sensitivity to the colors and textures of orchestration, expanding the palette of his own compositions. Interested, as well, in popular songs, Stevens particularly liked the tune, "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?,"<sup>4</sup> and, whenever he had the chance, would tip an orchestra to play it (Brazeau 76). Bing Crosby made a well-known recording of this tune. Interestingly enough, Stevens explained the phrase "Hoo-ing the slick trombones" (CP 170) by noting that it "means making Bing Crosby..." (LWS 783). Stevens' comparison of Crosby's idiosyncratic vocal practice of scooping from one note to another and a trombonist's occasional sliding from pitch to pitch, shows his acute sensitivity to musical effect.

Attending to musical structure but disregarding effect, David Michael Hertz, in *Angels of Reality*, explicates "Peter Quince at the Clavier" in terms of sonata form, pointing out that the poem's division into four parts corresponds to the four movements of "the

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<sup>4</sup>Anthony Sigmans, Stevens' friend and colleague at the Hartford, misquotes the name of the song as "Have You Ever Seen a Dream Girl Walking." "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?": Music by Harry Revel, Lyric by Mack Gordon, Copyright Paramount Productions (from the Movie *Sitting Pretty*) 1933.

standard classical form that is used by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert" (120). According to Hertz, within this overall structure, the first section/ "movement" of the poem/ "sonata, follows a Beethovenesque "sonata allegro" pattern of "exposition and development of musical ideas," containing first and second subjects. Though Hertz recognizes that the "'pizzicatti' of the 'Hosanna'" in "Peter Quince" are "uproariously funny" (120), he fails to notice the clever musical joke embedded in the poem. My chapter entitled "'Jocular Procreations'" examines this musical joke and elucidates its significance. By demonstrating that the poem's central joke is based on musical tuning systems, I provide an explanation for some of the dislocations that have plagued literary critics. The poem's dislocations of logic are a way of transcribing into words the dissonances that occur as a result of attempting to play complex modulations on an instrument tuned in just temperament. Deriving structures of thinking from the realm of music, Stevens conceptually orchestrates the idea that only an adaptive mode of thinking, paralleling the flexibility of equal temperament, can accommodate the rapid transitions within the modern world.

Thus, while recognizing that the fourth "movement" of "Peter Quince" conforms to a "philosophical rondo" in which "a composer plays with a theme...placing it in different contexts with harmonic and textural variations, sometimes modulating to different keys to heighten the drama of variation," Hertz misses the key to Stevens' complex, chromatic thought modulations within this serious musical joke. Stevens' conceptual

orchestrations are so subtle, they often "evade us, as in a senseless element" (CP 396). Within the outmoded and inflexible system of just intonation, can anyone do justice to the nuances of "Susanna's music"? My discovery of the play on tuning systems within "Peter Quince" "recapture[s] a lost blague" (CP 390). Interdisciplinary analyses of Stevens' poems need to go beyond mere delineation of musical structure. Ultimately, they must take into consideration the profound resonance produced by these structures and the concomitant overtones which result from Stevens' erudite musical allusions.

In reading through *The Collected Poems*, one must attend to the sounds as they evolve from early "bucks...clattering" (CP 3) to the silence of the late poems. Since to orchestrate a theme in music is to give it color, I have interpreted the concept of orchestration in a broad fashion, examining how Stevens colors conceptualizations using musical instruments, allusions, forms, and ideas, and illuminating the significance of these conceptual orchestrations and musical framings. "Choos[ing] to play" (CP 184) various instruments, Stevens uses their emotional valences to convey meaning.

The chapters that follow show that Stevens' orchestrations, choice of musical forms, and musical allusions are intended to help us understand and adjust to the rapidly changing modern world. The second chapter, "Score this Anecdote," examines "The Comedian as the Letter C" as a *bildungspoem*/ symphonic tone poem in which Crispin's odyssey is orchestrated with various instruments foreshadowing and portraying his stages of

development. The next chapters, "Jocular Procreations" and "A Million People on One String," examine Stevens' employment of the musical joke and the blues to renegotiate man's place in nature and in society. More specifically, "A Million People on One String" looks at the performer as a kind of orchestrator in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and reveals Stevens' use of blues as subtle sabotage to change "things as they are." The fifth chapter, "Invisible Audience," uncovers polyrhythmic interplay accenting the tension between private rehearsal and public performance in "Mozart 1935" and "The Idea of Order at Key West." The sixth chapter, "Then the Theatre Changed," examines how Stevens underscores knowledge as a provisional construct through his appropriation of musical instruments and forms. Chapter Seven, "Like a Page of Music," shows how Stevens performs a transgressive reading of scriptures by framing "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as a musical score in Byzantine kanon form. Together, these chapters demonstrate how Stevens' orchestrations, vividly colored by the ideas of Emerson and William James, work to provide a reassessment of our spiritual position in the universe. The penultimate chapter, "Silent Rhapsodist," examines Stevens' last volume of poetry, viewing the entropic quality of musical rests, silences, and scoring of natural objects as instruments within these poems as a rehearsal for death. Ultimately, the subtle orchestrations of a Stevens poem, like Strauss's "glancing chords" in *Rosenkavalier*, manage to "touch a chord" within us, allowing us to find ourselves "more truly and more strange" (CP 65).

## II. "Score this Anecdote"

One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight  
of the shore for a very long time.  
(André Gide)

Performing musicians often feel that an instrument tends to bear the distinctive sound of its native land's language. For example, a French cello intones the nasal, an Italian violin sings full and robust "vowels," an English viola chants the dark and noble, and a German double-bass growls the gutturals. In his poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1922), Wallace Stevens attends closely to the sounds, both verbal and instrumental, that each particular "soil" might engender. Through orchestration, the poem charts Comedian Crispin's odyssey to The New World and maps his changing mental states by matching his physical and psychological movements with various types of musical instruments and with progressive development from simple monody at the beginning of the poem to four-part harmony by the poem's conclusion.

Stevens was particularly sensitive to the notion of indigenous sound, feeling that American composers (and poets) should strive for it rather than draw upon inappropriate foreign tones.

When I hear a piece of music and want to identify it, my first attempt is to do so by trying to fix the nationality of the musician. American music is slow, thin and often a bit affected as if music found its source in something other than the ordinary human being. ...We need a few American masters in both

music and painting before we can have any real identity. (LWS 859)

The "musical trope" (Hollander 133) commences with the poem's title, "The Comedian as the Letter C," intended to be heard as its homonymic twin, "sea," thus announcing the poem's voyage theme, as well as the letter and the musical pitch C. Moreover, the poem's initial statement, "Nota: Man is the intelligence of his soil," underscores this "note's" retrograde transformation in section four, "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence." Continuing the musical trope, Crispin tries to "stem [as in adding a stem to a whole note to shorten it to a half note value] verboseness in the sea." This "stem[ing]" in turn establishes a thematic *leitmotif* for Crispin, whose life and aspirations at the poem's conclusion are abbreviated, "clipped" short like a staccato note.

Marie Borroff states that Stevens' poetry is a virtual "verbal peddler's pie" ('58), incorporating the language of three different categories: (1) elevated or formal language, (2) foreign borrowings or archaic words, and (3) colloquialisms, slang, or words of native origin. Though other critics as well, including Frank Kermode, Helen Vendler, and Harold Bloom, have commented upon this heterogeneity of language in "The Comedian as the Letter C," none has recognized that Stevens simultaneously orchestrates the poem for an equally motley assortment of instruments. In part, these instruments are reflective of the diverseness of the American culture.

Stevens matches Borroff's language categories with musical equivalents. Thus, formal, elevated language corresponds to his

use of "high-brow" instruments of the symphony orchestra or military band: for example, trumpet, bassoon, or drums. Foreign borrowings or archaisms correspond to Stevens' use of such foreign, ancient, or obsolete instruments as the tambour, a French drum; the lute, a Renaissance stringed instrument with a pear-shaped body, originally from the Middle East (thus, Crispin is called a "musician of pears"); and the psaltery, an ancient plucked stringed instrument similar to the zither, also from the Middle East. Colloquialisms, slang, or words of native origin correspond to Stevens' orchestrations for common, native, or primitive instruments: banjo,<sup>1</sup> marimba, and tom-tom. Borroff analyzes Stevens' categories of language use, examining his "verbal music" on specific line, phrase, and word levels. This chapter undertakes a similar analysis in order to uncover the significance of Stevens' specific orchestrations of idea through his choice of musical instruments.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" suggests the loose structure of a symphonic tone poem composed in six movements: I. "The World Without Imagination," II. "Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan," III. "Approaching Carolina," IV. "The Idea of a Colony," V. "A Nice Shady Home," and VI. "And Daughters with Curls." It is a self-mocking *Bildungspoem* on the order of Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage." However, lacking Hector Berlioz<sup>2</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup>Though the banjo is thought to have derived from a similar African instrument, I include it in this category since, for most people, the banjo seems the quintessential American folk instrument.

<sup>2</sup>*Harold in Italy*, scored for solo viola and orchestra

orchestrate "The Comedian," Stevens "orchestrates" it himself, with complex fecundity.

A 1924 article on orchestration by H.J. Wood<sup>3</sup> exhorts the fledgling composer "...to hear an orchestra every day, and also to learn two or three orchestral instruments, if possible one in each of the three main groups of strings, wood-winds and brass; they should at least be able to play them in a student's orchestra." Wood claims, "Only by thus *living in a sea of orchestral sound* can a musician feel and learn the varied harmonic, rhythmic and thematic sonorities" (363, emphasis added). Thus, in section one of "The Comedian," Crispin, an apprentice to music, poetry, and life, starts out as a "skinny sailor" whose changing states of development Stevens carefully orchestrates for a host of musical instruments.

Crispin is depicted as "short shanks." A "shank" refers to the shin or lower part of the leg, as well as the body or stem of printing type. Thus, the comedian Crispin, whose name and description both start with *C*, is a "character" inscribed in "the book of moonlight" both as protagonist and as letter. The word "eye," repeated four times in as many lines, emphasizes *C* as the "sea" upon which Crispin the sailor travels, and as his "see" of self discovery. The reiterated "eye" casts us as his colleagues muttering the sailor's obedient response, "Aye-aye." He journeys to find a "mythology of self, blotched out beyond unblotching."

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<sup>3</sup>Composer-conductor who established the London Prom Concerts in 1895

Initially, sailor Crispin is portrayed as a foolish musician playing the outmoded "lute" while foppishly sporting a hodgepodge of garments gleaned from his travels:

Crispin,  
The lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane,  
The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak  
Of China, cap of Spain...

Stevens, orchestrating with internal rhyme ("thane/Spain"), uses its sing-song quality for comic effect. Moreover, Crispin's "bellowing breeches" shout the sounds of his inept music-poetry.

Despite his extensive travels, Crispin's peering into the sea-glass (C-glass) boomerangs an image only of what he is developmentally capable of seeing--himself, scored for simple monody. Thus, the emotionally self-centered sailor is assigned only one voice of music and is humorously portrayed by a musical metaphor that conducts sexual innuendo: "Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust." Crispin:

...now beheld himself,  
A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass.  
What word split up in cllickering syllables  
And storming under multitudinous tones  
Was name for this short shanks in all that brunt?  
Crispin was washed away by magnitude.  
The whole of life that still remained in him  
Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear,  
Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh,  
Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust.

The passage, as a whole, plays on the sounds of C in all its various embodiments. However, while commenting on his use of the many sounds of the letter C in the poem, Stevens warned his readers not to become so preoccupied with it that they ignore the poem's other features:

The sounds of the letter C, both hard and soft, include other letters like K, X...and S, all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian. But if I had made that perfectly clear, susceptible readers might have read the poem with ears like elephants' listening for the play of this sound as people at a concert listen for the sounds indicating Till Eulenspiegel in Strauss' music. (LWS 778, 294)

Interestingly, by scoring Crispin's early developmental state for the lute, Stevens orchestrates several ideas. Crispin's inability to play "polyphony," suggests that he plays his lute in the Arabic style, plucking it with a quill plectrum. The "Arabic *al-úd* (meaning 'the wood')" was already "established in Spain by the tenth century" (Remnant 32). The instrument migrated north, evolved, and appeared in England by the thirteenth century (Remnant 32). However, it was not until "the last quarter of the fifteenth century" that lutanists<sup>4</sup> began plucking "the strings with the thumb and fingers of the right hand" (Randel 460), an innovation that occurred around the time of the discovery of The New World. Since this musical advance enabled lutanists to play two or more voices simultaneously (Baines 193, Randel 460), a "polyphony" which is "beyond" Crispin, it becomes clear that, at this developmental stage, he has not yet discovered The New World in terms of musical-poetic inspiration.

Portrayed as "short shanks," Crispin is unable to make mental connections because he is missing that part of a tool or instrument which connects the handle with the working part, as in the shank of a scissors. One of his difficulties, then, is that he

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<sup>4</sup>I have chosen to follow Stevens' (Webster's) spelling here for "lutanists," although Remnant and Randel spell the word "lutenists."

cannot use archaic mythology as a tool to help him find a personal "mythology of self." As seen by Crispin "the lost terrestrial," the mythological god Triton is an ineffectual, decapitated God.

Triton incomplicate with that  
Which made him Triton, nothing left of him,  
Except in faint, memorial gesturings,  
That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,

Moreover, to Crispin the modern skeptic, the musical tritone (augmented fourth interval) is devoid of its import as the famous devil's interval because he cannot connect it to a mythology or cosmic harmony. Other "multitudinous tones," the voices of a rich polyphony, are "beyond" him. He hears only intermittent, vague strains of an ennobling mythology that could endow life with meaning, as an unconscious "sunken voice," sounding like a "hallucinating horn." Thus, "dejected," he is reduced to a lower-case letter, the "merest minuscule in the gales."

The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,  
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...

Crispin begins to hear mocking sounds: "Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried/ Celestial sneering boisterously." His anxiety over his insignificant place in the world parallels mankind's centuries-old cosmic doubt. Appropriately, Stevens scores this age-old anxiety for the trumpet, which "has a very long history, having been used in ancient Egypt, the Near East, and Greece" (Randel 880). "During much of that time, however," the trumpet served as "a signaling device" (Randel 880). Thus, Stevens signals the long lineage of man's doubt about self-worth by scoring

for an ancient instrument which survives to the present day in symphony orchestras. Moreover, the tubing of the modern trumpet, as opposed to its ancient counterpart, is folded and shortened, again underscoring the Crispin "clipped" leitmotif and illustrating modern man's feeling of diminishment when confronted by thoughts of his inconsequential place in a stochastic universe.

At a low spiritual ebb, Crispin evolves from his previous state of self-absorption in his physical demeanor into "an introspective voyager." His change in insight ("Crispin beheld Crispin was made new") parallels an auditory change, for in addition to his own voice he now hears a drone.

Crispin confronting it, a vocable thing,  
But with a speech belched out of hoary darks  
Noway resembling his...

No longer the "insatiable egoist" unable to discern his own eventual demise in the midst of an ongoing world, he can now hear the voice of Nature, "the strict austerity/ Of one vast, subjugating, final tone." Though "the singing of a melody against a single sustained note" cannot "be considered as 'harmonization'" (Eaglefield-Hull 214), this drone, as a primitive sort of harmony, scores Crispin's developmental move away from self-centeredness.

In the second "movement" of this "tone poem," "Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan," Crispin is like the "Maya sonneteers" who ignore the poetic material in their midst (the many colorful exotic songbirds) and bow to European tradition by writing sonnets to the nightingale. Likewise, his thoughts are so colored by European influence that he cannot avail himself of the

inspiration of his native environment: "to find/ In any commonplace the sought-for aid." With a trumpet playing a mocking fanfare, Stevens underscores Crispin's rejection of local poetic inspiration and his submission to European forms.

Much trumpeted, made desperately clear...  
How greatly had he grown in his demesne,  
This auditor of insects! He...  
That wrote his couplet yearly to the spring. ...

Crispin, the "auditor of insects" in section one, is described with the neologism "nincompated," suggesting that he has the pate/head of a fool or simpleton. In section two, he is again described with belittling diminutive terms. His mental state is humorously orchestrated for "sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly," percussive, natural objects. He is just beginning to hear a new kind of music, not a somnolent music "for sleepers halfway waking,"<sup>5</sup> but a music/poetry "indigenous" to the Americas, "intrinsic verse" of native "soil" rather than that "soil[ed]" by European influences. Crispin envisions this verse to be:

Of an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed,  
Incredible to prudes, the mint of dirt,  
Green barbarism turning paradigm...  
For Crispin and his quill to catechize.

This new music, like the "too juicily opulent" earth of the new continents, eventually proves too complex for the skills of poet-musician Crispin "to catechize." Nevertheless, he begins to discern the strains of an American aesthetic, "a new reality in parrot-squawks."

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<sup>5</sup>Possibly alluding to Johann Sebastian Bach's "Wachet Auf" (Sleepers Awake), BWV 645.

Unfortunately, as he tours a local cathedral, Crispin regresses, reverting to the pathetic fallacy by interpreting an approaching storm's rumble as punishment for his incipient rebellion against European poetic influences and his blasphemous poetry, antithetical to religious "prudes."<sup>6</sup> His regression at the moment of potential enlightenment is underscored linguistically by such foreign borrowings as "façade," and "gasconade," constituting comic internal rhymes. Appropriately, the retribution exacted on him by traditional European religious and artistic influences is scored for the traditional "drums" of military music, "bassoons" of the "high-brow" symphony orchestra, and the archaic regal "clarion."

Inspecting the cabildo, the façade  
 Of the cathedral, making notes, he heard  
 A rumbling...it seemed,  
 Approaching like a gasconade of drums.  
 The white cabildo darkened, the façade  
 As sullen as the sky, was swallowed up  
 In swift, successive shadows, dolefully.  
 The rumbling broadened as it fell. The wind,  
 Tempestuous clarion, with heavy cry,  
 Came bluntly thundering, more terrible  
 Than the revenge of music on bassoons.  
 Gesticulating lightning, mystical,  
 Made pallid flitter. Crispin, here, took flight.  
 ...He knelt in the cathedral with the rest,

As an "annotator" or creator of musical-textual notes, Crispin wishes to "own" the sounds of his physical universe. However, he is reduced to translating monumental forces into humorous orchestrations, comparing the thunder, for example, to "the revenge of music on bassoons." This phrase conjures up the

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<sup>6</sup>Perhaps like the one in Stevens' *A High-Toned Old Christian Woman* (CP 59).

bassoon passages in the comic symphonic poem, *L'Apprenti sorcier* (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*), composed in 1897 by Paul Dukas,<sup>7</sup> a piece with which Stevens would have been familiar.<sup>8</sup> Stevens' apt phrase produces a symphonic counterpart to Comedian Crispin. Described here as "valet," Crispin is just as inundated and terrified by the deluge, as the poor sorcerer's apprentice is by the bewitched, water-carrying brooms, represented by bassoons in the orchestral work.

Then, "envious" of the storm's force and power, Crispin hears in it the archaic strain of Ancient Greek mythology, "the note of Vulcan," "the thing that makes him envious in phrase." Crispin's stages of mental development have taken him through self-absorption, evolving introspection, and now in section three, further gaining of the mental freedom to understand his inner self in terms of the "indigenous" forces that impinge upon and shape it. This recognition is an important step toward his later modification of "man is the intelligence of his soil" to its reversal, "the soil is man's intelligence." He gains self-possession even as he begins to understand that his "self" is possessed by and of its native land.

His mind was free  
And more than free, elate, intent, profound  
and studious of a self possessing him...

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<sup>7</sup>Based on the ballad "Der Zauberlehrling" by Goethe.

<sup>8</sup>Included in Michael O. Stegman's discography of Stevens' record collection.. Since this particular recording was issued after "The Comedian" was published, it is assumed that Stevens heard the work in concert, was familiar with it, and was prompted to buy it when it was later released on the Toscanini/New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra Recording (Vic. 7021).

In contrast to the previous section's unwavering drone of a "vast subjugating, final tone," Crispin becomes aware of shifting sounds, "the quavers" (musical trills) of the local torrential rains and thunder. Coloring the thought that poetry-music can be "the mint of dirt" of its locale, the following passage's purple mountains, seem to reverberate with "America the Beautiful's"<sup>9</sup> "purple mountains' majesty":

Beyond him, westward, lay  
The mountainous ridges, purple balustrades,  
In which the thunder, lapsing in its clap,  
Let down gigantic quavers of its voice,  
For Crispin to vociferate again.

Significantly, Stevens subtly suggests that the "Star-Spangled Banner," a British import<sup>10</sup> having an expansive vocal range<sup>11</sup> that reduces most ordinary citizens to comic singers at best, is an inappropriate anthem for the American soil. In "Culture," Emerson expresses this wish to be free of European cultural bondage: "Can we never extract this tape-worm of Europe from the brain of our countrymen?" (1022). Perhaps, instead of a national anthem that glorifies the steadfastness of the flag in "the

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<sup>9</sup>"America the Beautiful," words by Katharine Lee Bates (1895) set to music of "Materna" composed by Samuel A Ward (1882).

<sup>10</sup>According to Paul Nettl in *National Anthems*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1967), "It is ...an established fact that the first report ["the first public mention of the song" appeared in the *Baltimore American* of September 21, 1814 ] on the song does identify the tune to be used with it. It was the tune of 'To Anacreon in Heaven,'" a song imported from England..." John Stafford Smith (1750-1836), "a British musician, conductor, and organist" composed the "song with the simple title, "Anacreontic Society," meaning it for use of this London "social-musical-masonic club." (203-4). "It was officially adopted as the National Anthem of the United States by an Act of Congress in 1931." (208)

<sup>11</sup>"America the Beautiful"'s range is a ninth, whereas that of the "Star Spangled Banner" is a twelfth.

rocket's red glare" of war, our national song should extol the beauties of a large and varied land.

Section III, "Approaching Carolina," begins with the lines:

The book of moonlight is not written yet  
Nor half begun, but, when it is, leave room  
For Crispin, fagot in the lunar fire,

Here, Crispin is further reduced to a "fagot" (twig), mere kindling rather than solid inspirational fuel. "Fagot," also a foreign borrowing (fagotto = Italian for "bassoon"), is reminiscent of his earlier fear of the thunderstorm's "revenge of music on bassoons." His imagined punishment by "lunar fire," merely reflected light from the sun, prevents him from writing poetry that is anything more than a pale reflection of European models. To describe Crispin as "fagot," a badge branding heretics, reminding them of their narrow escape from punishment (burning at the stake?), is to label him a failed iconoclast.

Thus, more fertile imaginative territory is always "beyond" Crispin: "America was always north to him." The meet material for this New England sailor is only half-defrosted, like the northern "spring" which comes "in clinking pannicles/ Of half-dissolving frost." Once again, as in the "sonorous nutshells" phrase, Stevens orchestrates Crispin's mental state (pannicle = brain pan) using a percussive effect that resonates with section one's earlier "ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh." Prophetically, Crispin's attempts at verse/poetry are likened to the New England summer:

...the summer came,  
If ever, whisked and wet, not ripening,  
Before winter's vacancy returned.



Perhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave  
 The liaison, the blissful liaison,  
 Between himself and his environment,

Moreover, Crispin abjures his northern roots for the "flourishing tropics," too colorful to be set in the four-part harmony of New England "hymn[s]" accompanied by "inhibited instruments/ Of over-civil stops" (implied organ). Within the context of the surrounding predominantly iambic pentameter lines, the stubbornly unscorable (for Crispin) rich sounds of the tropics are described in a line of irregular rhythm:

/ . . / . . / . / . .  
 Prickly and obdurate, dense, harmonious,

Searching for "the fecund minimum," "a sinewy nakedness," Crispin sails upriver to a lumber camp. There, the scent of rotting things ("arrant stinks/ rankness" of "ropes," "sacks" and "rotten fences," all symbols for the containers of old poetic forms) makes him realize his defect of sight:

...It made him see how much  
 Of what he saw he never saw at all.

Whereas Crispin earlier had gained a sense of "intrinsic verse," he now begins to understand:

...the essential prose  
 As being, in a world so falsified,  
 The one integrity for him, the one  
 Discovery still possible to make,  
 To which all poems were incident, unless  
 That prose would wear a poem's guise at last.

Section IV, "The Idea of a Colony," starts with the proclamation, "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence," a transformation of the poem's initial words, much like musical retrograde. Crispin begins to recognize the manner in which man's

surroundings inform his being. He is like the pianist who, while struggling to devise fingerings, discovers the efficacy of temporarily crossing arms above the middle C divide of the keyboard in order to master the instrument's geography. Crispin the traveler determines that his own discovery is "worth crossing seas to find." Suddenly, he banishes a linguistic string of foreign, Latinate borrowings:

...exit lex,  
 Rex and principium, exit the whole  
 Shebang, Exeunt omnes. Here was prose  
 More exquisite than any tumbling verse:  
 A still new continent in which to dwell.

The "still new continent" is native soil, still unexplored as the ground for Crispin's poetry. He realizes that he has been dominated by foreign influences, and that the goal of his voyage should be "to drive away the shadow" of these "stale," forces and "to make a new intelligence prevail."

The extent to which one's soil colors one's thinking becomes clear to Crispin:

Thus:  
 The natives of the rain are rainy men.  
 Although they paint effulgent, azure lakes,  
 And April hillsides wooded white and pink,  
 Their azure has a cloudy edge...  
 ...  
 And in their music showering sounds intone.

Even the music of these "rainy" natives reflects their surroundings." Since poetry, too, should reflect one's environment, "sepulchral señors...should make the intricate Sierra scan" and "dark Brazilians" should sing "dits" (songs) of the pampas. A poet should be the "spokesman" of his specific locale.

The man in Georgia walking among pines  
 Should be pine-spokesman. The responsive man,  
 Planting his pristine cores in Florida,  
 Should prick thereof, not on the psaltery,  
 But on the banjo's categorical gut,

Crispin begins to reject the foreign (Turk/lute) for the American  
 ("Esquimau" [sic]/marimba).

For application Crispin strove,  
 Abhorring Turk as Esquimau, the lute  
 As the marimba,...<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, the "gut" feeling arising from the discoveries made during his voyage, causes him to reject the ancient stringed "psaltery" for the "banjo."<sup>15</sup> This orchestration resonates with a line from Stephen Foster's famous American folksong, "Oh, Susanna": "For I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee,"<sup>16</sup> underscoring Crispin's move toward more fitting poetic inspiration. With the phrase "the banjo's categorical gut," Stevens puns, illustrating the cat gut material from which strings for musical instruments were reputedly made.

Though there are onomatopoeic transcriptions for animal sounds (the dog's "bow-wow" or the cow's "moo"), standardized transcriptions do not exist for the sounds of musical instruments. Thus, Stevens is free to orchestrate the sounds of his instruments

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<sup>14</sup>"The marimba was developed around 1910 in the USA, with antecedents among the folk instruments of this African name in Central America..." (Baines 205).

<sup>15</sup>The original 'banja' [was] made by slaves on the New World plantations—mentioned in the Antilles in 1678 and in Maryland in 1754, [and]...it may have been remembered from West Africa, where the name 'bania' has still been reported" (Baines 20).

<sup>16</sup>Philip F. Gura's "Banjos on Our Knees," *American Quarterly* 44.2 (1992) 271-278, discusses the banjo's move from consideration as an African-American instrument to the notion that "for two centuries now the banjo has epitomized an American instrument" (271).

with verbal music bearing richly significant overtones. By using the reiterated word "tuck," he appropriately renders the banjo's sound while indicating what one must do to produce that sound, "plucking" or "pulling" its strings (*OED* XVIII.648). Thus, even the sound of the American banjo is saturated with archaic borrowed meanings enfolded within its transcription, since "tuck" is an obsolete word signifying a trumpet blast (*OED* XVIII.648). This jarring sound could be interpreted as an orchestration of the idea that the banjo came to America by means of the slave trade. "Tuck" also undermines Crispin's new-found enlightenment with a bit of orchestrated "celestial sneering." Its other meanings as a shortening pleat, a pointed sword, or even as a book flap used to keep it closed, serve to foreshadow Crispin's "clipped" poetic/musical career and to underscore the Crispin "short-shanks" leitmotif.

Crispin, now described as an "aspiring clown" (similar to the Canon Aspirin/aspiring? in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction") finds:

He could not be content with counterfeit,  
With masquerade of thought, with hapless words.

However, in his "grotesque apprenticeship to chance event," he cannot evade the influences and pre-established language that mask thought. The "cock declaims/ Trinket pasticcio," proclaiming Crispin's poetry to be little more than a valueless hodge-podge, imitative of the styles and forms of others. Crispin is described in dual fashion either as the fraudulent deceiver, "tiptoe cozener;" or

the precise servant of literature who prefers "text to gloss," "veracious page on page, exact."

In section four, "A Nice Shady Home," Crispin abandons his plans to "colonize his polar planterdom" and settles instead in the south. He marries a "prismy [showy] blonde" and, like "Candide," is "content" to be pampered by and to "carouse" with his "duenna," his life becoming narrower, more "confined." Though he had originally aspired to be "preceptor to the sea," he is now merely the settler of a cabin, "magister of a single room." His advancing age and lapsing ambition are described in the way his gait, now a "trod," contrasts with the liveliness of the morning, orchestrated with the musical term "presto."<sup>17</sup> His life is "composed of evenings like cracked shutters fleeing/ Upon the rumpling bottomness." Here, Stevens incorporates another character from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Bottom ("rumpling bottomness"), just as he had earlier embedded Snug the joiner, ("snug hibernal"). Stevens includes these "yeomen" characters and the "moonlight" element of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* play-within-a-play, suggesting a comparison between Crispin and Shakespeare's bumbling workmen-actors.

Unwilling to further plumb the depths of his psyche and to sound the complex voices of "indigenous" harmonies, Crispin "stop[s] short before a plum" of a poem.

Whoever hunts a matinal continent  
May, after all, stop short before a plum  
And be content and still be realist.

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<sup>17</sup>A musical term, indicating a lively, quick tempo.

Thus, for him, "The words of things entangle and confuse./The plum survives its poems" (*CP* 41).

The world remains for Crispin's descendants to describe. Reaching the false "bottomness" of the depths he is willing to sound, he, like Bottom the Ass, is left to question whether he should have "bray[ed]" his acquiescence:

...in profoundest brass  
Aointing his dreams with fugal requiems?  
Was he to company vastest things defunct  
With a blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky?  
Scrawl a tragedian's testament? Prolong  
His active force in an inactive dirge,  
Which, let the tall musicians call and call,  
Should merely call him dead? Pronounce amen  
Through choirs infolded to the utmost clouds?  
Because he built a cabin who once planned  
Loquacious columns by the ructive sea?

Unable to hear the complex polyphony of "fugal requiems," Crispin orchestrates his dirge for the incongruous combination of regal "brass" and primitive "tom-toms." The comic effect of the "tragedian's testament" is enhanced by the "iterative" word "tom-tom" (Borroff 44) and by the odd sound produced by these instruments, a noisy "blubber[ing]" bearing overtones of whale fat, thus underscoring the demise of his ambition in overblown, hyperbolic tones. Crispin's "clipped" career is orchestrated both by Stevens' reference to the contrastively "tall musicians" and by the "short-shanks" leitmotif which sounds here as the "choirs infolded to the utmost clouds."

The "march" of time is scored for "crickets" who "beat their tambours [little drums]" around Crispin's cabin. The borrowed French instrument, "tambour," punctuates his retreat into the

"quotidian" with a break-down pun by dividing into "tam," conjuring up "tame" + "bour," conjuring up "bore." The timbre of his life is now of the "quotidian composed," a daily existence that "sap[s would-be] philosophers." Unable to sustain self-analysis for long, he rationalizes:

Can one man think one thing and think it long?  
Can one man be one thing and be it long?

This questioning with its reiterated word "long," contrastively underscores his "short-shanks" leitmotif.

Like an instrument, Crispin is "fortun[ed]" by the sun. The negligible "return" on the fortune of his life's investment is merely the hunched posture of an old man doled out by the niggardly treasury of life to which there is no key or clue.

...the quotidian  
Like this, saps like the sun, true foretuner,  
For all it takes, it gives a humped return  
Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed.

The word "unkeyed," implies that Crispin is out of tune with his native world. Further, Stevens is perhaps playing a pun on Francis Scott Key, suggesting that our national anthem is really "unkeyed" to the rich harmonies of the United States. Moreover, an "exchiquier" ("eschaquier," or "chekker") is conjectured to have been a "stringed keyboard instrument...already known in England in 1360" (Remnant 79). However, scholars have argued over what precisely an exchiquier was. One scholar claims it was a clavichord, while another suggests that "the name was not

restricted to any one kind of instrument."<sup>18</sup> Musical scholar, Dr. Mary Remnant, summarizes her own inconclusive findings by stating, "Unfortunately no solution has yet been forthcoming from the visual arts of the fourteenth century" (80). Considered, then, as an orchestration of the motley American identity, the "exchiquier" appropriately illustrates why Crispin is unable to extract a self "beyond all unblotching" from this "piebald" (blotched/spotted) instrument.

Having settled down to "things within his actual eye," in section six entitled "And Daughters with Curls," Crispin effects a "return to social nature" as he fathers four daughters "nibbling at the sugared void." If musical "polyphony" was once "beyond his baton's thrust," his progeny now provide four-part harmony, the missing voices. The "chromatics" that they "spread...in hilarious dark" are both color chromatics of varying skin tones ("puerile tints/ Of spiced and weathery rouges": "blushed," "flaxen," "blasphemously pink," and "pearly,") and musical chromatics since the girls seem very close in age. The second child is an infant "not yet awake" to anything but "the motherly footstep." The third is also a pre-toddler, "a creeper" still crawling "under the jaunty leaves," and the fourth child is "pent now" in some kind of playpen. Are Crispin's daughters quadruplets born only moments apart? If so, they suggest the simultaneous sounding of the tones of a chord: "sounds of music coming to accord."

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<sup>18</sup>The theories of Edwin Ripin (*Galpin Society Journal*, xxviii, pp. 110-25) and Christopher Page (*Early Music*, VII/4, pp. 482-9) as discussed by Remnant (80).

Four daughters in a world too intricate  
 In the beginning, four blithe instruments  
 Of differing struts, four voices several  
 In couch, four more personal, intimate  
 As buffo, yet divers, four mirrors blue...  
 Hinting incredible hues...

Crispin as the "letter C" has "reproduced in...family font."

The poem's last section contains directions ("score this anecdote") for orchestrating/interpreting Crispin's tale. As "disguised pronunciamento," the conclusions drawn from his life are ambiguously dual. Either his life, though "muted, mused and perfectly revolved," is filled with the harmony found in his "daughters...upon his lap," or he has taken nothing from his life's investment and is a "profitless [prophetless]/ Philosopher concluding fadedly" and out of tune ("prone to distemper") with his soil. If he has embellished the tale ("relation") of his life, "illuminating" it like a fanciful golden letter in a medieval manuscript, the "distort[ion]" avails naught:

...what can all this matter since  
 The relation comes benignly, to its end?

So may the relation of each man be clipped.

At the poem's outset, Crispin was portrayed as having "a barber's eye." At its conclusion, the poor comical barber is "clipped." As comedian, Crispin is likened to his ancient counterpart, the *komodos*,<sup>19</sup> who carried tales from one part of the country to another. His questing spirit is "clipped," reminding us of shorn Samson's loss of vital strength. Moreover, as poet, Crispin fears that if his works are too "quotidian," they will be read like a

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<sup>19</sup>Greek *komodos* = "barber."

newspaper, clipped and tossed away. In his final days, the "relation" of his "voice" to other pitches of a chord is "clipped," reduced to a musical "unison," "a tone identical in pitch with another" (Webster's *NTID* 2500). Tragically, the comedian dies just as he begins to discover polyphony through procreation of "four voices." With alliteration intoning a bell sound and the "thrum" of some unnamed stringed instrument (foreshadowing "The...Blue Guitar"?), we are instructed to:

Forgather and bell boldly Crispin's last  
Deduction. Thrum with a proud *douceur*  
His grand pronunciamento...

Crispin's "tone poem," though it effects a closure through its cadence on "music as it comes to unison," leaves a significant "thrum[ming]" in our ears. As the final orchestration of sound in "The Comedian," "thrum" is far from being a purely onomatopoeic rendering of the sound made by plucking or strumming a stringed instrument. The word, instead, carefully underscores Crispin's textual ("text" from Latin "texere" = to weave) legacy. However foreshortened, "tucked," or "clipped" his life may be, Crispin's daughters as "four blithe instruments" remain, nevertheless, to weave a wonderful "rhapsody."<sup>20</sup> Metaphorically, they are indeed "thrum," the "warp threads left on the loom after the cloth [of Crispin's life text] has been removed" (Webster's *NTID* 2386).

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<sup>20</sup>Greek *rhapsodos* = "to stitch together."

### III. "Jocular Procreations"

Whose singing is a mode of laughter...  
(Wallace Stevens CP 218)

"Few poets have made a more interesting rhetoric out of just fooling around: turning things upside down, looking at them from under the sofa..."<sup>1</sup> says Randall Jarrell of Wallace Stevens. Following modernism's tendency to amalgamate art forms, Stevens incorporates various types of *musical jokes* into his poems. One type involves orchestrating for unusual objects that are not generally considered to be musical instruments. For example, the modernist composer, George Antheil, scored his *Ballet Mécanique* for airplane propeller and machines. Stevens, too, scores for such oddities as the "well-tempered apricot" or the "egg-plant of good air" (musical air, CP 253). Another type of musical joke surprises the listener with incongruous sounds. An example of this is Mozart's *Ein Musikalischer Spass*, K. 522 (1787), the deliberate dissonances of which recall Stevens' "crash[ing] symbols" and "roaring horns" in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (CP 91).

Though the idea of incorporating musical jokes in poetry might have been modern, the musical joke, itself, in its various forms was not a new development. Probably one of the most famous jokers was Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), who startled his drowsy, dinner-stuffed audience by scoring a "sudden fortissimo crash on a weak beat in the slow movement" of the

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<sup>1</sup>Jarrell, Randall in Brown, Ashley and Haller, Robert S. The Achievement of Wallace Stevens. (New York: Gordian Press, 1973) 185.

*Symphony No. 94*, justly earning it a nickname, *The Surprise Symphony* (Grout 489). Haydn also played an orchestration-based musical joke in his *Symphony No. 45 (The Farewell Symphony)* which amounted to a strike against Prince Esterhazy for vacation rights. Various groups of musicians walk off stage during the performance, rendering the orchestration increasingly sparse until finally, two lone first violins remain to play the closing measures.

Another type of musical joke is that which is quote-based or musically allusive. For example, in the last movement of Hector Berlioz's programmatic *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), a transgressive character is symbolically "punished" with the wrath of God through quotation of the *Dies Irae* motif. In the twentieth century, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) musically undermined the censorship of the oppressive Communist régime by incorporating sarcastic orchestrations of military marches and well-known themes in his symphonies. For example, in the last movement of his *Sixth Symphony, Op. 54* (1939), he incorporates the tune *Cielito Lindo*, quite possibly as a sly quip alluding to Leon Trotsky's banishment to Mexico City (1936). Shostakovich humorously orchestrates the first statement of this tune with the double basses grumbling it as a depiction of Trotsky's unwilling exile. Similarly, Wallace Stevens provides a clever musical quote in his poem "Ploughing on Sunday" (CP 20), in which a proud and blasphemous farmer boasts of "ploughing North America" while the other country-folk presumably are attending church. Stevens devilishly orchestrates this moment with an obnoxious horn.

Remus, blow your horn!  
I'm ploughing on Sunday,  
Ploughing North America.  
Blow your horn!

Tum-ti-tum,  
Ti-tum-tum-tum!  
The turkey-cock's tail  
Spreads to the sun.

The musical joke consists of the horn sound's rhythmic equivalent to the opening notes of the introduction of Johann Strauss's *The Emperor Waltz*: "Tum-ti-tum,/Ti-tum-tum-tum" (♩♪♪♪♪♪♪♪), foreshadowing "The Emperor of Ice Cream," a later poem in the volume. The musical allusion to "The Emperor of Ice Cream" underscores the thematic parallel between the two poems. In "The Emperor of Ice Cream," the attempts of the woman, now deceased, to dress up life by embroidering fantails (feathers) or fantail pigeons on the sheet which ultimately serves as her burial shroud, are shown to be as futile as the ploughman's boasting. Boasting and embroidery are both made out to be as ephemeral as ice-cream, empty as the Emperor's new clothes. Moreover, the "turkey-cock's tail" and the "horn" in "Ploughing on Sunday" conjure up the embroidered "fantails" and the "horny feet" of "The Emperor of Ice Cream," eerily underscoring both poems' *carpe diem* motif.

Similarly, in "Botanist on Alp (No. 2)," Stevens uses musical allusion to orchestrate his familiar theme that obsolete mythologies of heaven and hell must be replaced by an "earthier" emphasis on physical life in the here and now.

The crosses on the convent roofs

Gleam sharply as the sun comes up.

What's down below is in the past  
Like last night's crickets, far below.

And what's above is in the past  
As sure as all the angels are.

Why should the future leap the clouds  
The bays of heaven brighted, blued?

For who could tolerate the earth  
Without that poem, or without

An earthier one, tum, tum ti-tum,  
As of those crosses, glittering,

And merely of their glittering,  
A mirror of mere delight?

Stevens' "chant" of "long celestial death" paraphrases the Christmas Carol, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and by significantly omitting the word "come," suggests that the chant of traditional religion offers no possibility of earthly sexual fulfillment. Stevens orchestrates a contrast between the sterility of this "chant" and the delight of consummated love by alluding rhythmically to the "Wedding March" ("Here Comes the Bride") of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Act III: "Tum, tum-ti-tum" (  $\frac{2}{4}$  ♩ ♪. ♪. ♪. ♪. ).

Yet another type of musical joke involves rude juxtapositions, confluents, or musical anachronisms. For example, "Professor Peter Schickele" pokes fun at scholars through his invention of the fictive P.D.Q. Bach, whose music thrives on such anachronisms as finishing a classical phrase with a "show biz" or commercial cadence. The humor in P.D.Q. Bach largely depends

on the listener's ability to recognize musical styles and to detect the anachronistic juxtapositions in his music.

In "Two Tales of Liadoff,"<sup>2</sup> Stevens scores this kind of anachronism, a key to which is his play on the words "rocket" and "ovation." The poem tells "two tales" simultaneously, one of peace and another of war. Stevens further underscores the double tale through his choice of the name "Liadov," which anagrammatically contains the word "Iliad." Figuring in "Liadov's" dual tale, the "rocket" is both peaceful, celebratory firework and "incendiary weapon" (Webster's *TNID* 1965). As a weapon, the rocket is a part of the American cultural heritage, sung in our national anthem's phrase "And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,/ Gave proof through the night..." ("The Star Spangled Banner" Francis Scott Key).

In the meantime, Stevens depicts Liadov (1855-1914), "a long time after his death," performing at a piano perched on a cloud. Stevens orchestrates a musical joke based on an anachronistic third meaning of "rocket" by having Anatoly Liadov, a 19th-early 20th century composer, play the "haunted arpeggios" of what would seem to be a *Mannheim rocket*, a popular musical device of eighteenth century classical composers, consisting of an

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<sup>2</sup>Michael O. Stegman has established that Stevens was familiar with the works of Anatoly Liadov (see his Stevens' Discography). He writes that Holly Stevens stated that her parents had sheet music by the composer. Moreover, the Stevens discography contains two recordings of Liadov works, *The Enchanted Lake, Op. 62* and *Eight Russian Folksongs, Op. 58*.

I have chosen the spelling *Liadov* over that used by Stevens for his poem, because it is the one used by Michael O. Stegman in the Stevens Discography, and is the current transliteration from the Russian.

arpeggio or scale-like theme ascending "on and on" through several octaves.

Do you remember how the rocket went on  
And on, at night, exploding finally  
In an ovation of resplendent forms-

Ovation on ovation of large blue men  
In pantaloons of fire and women hatched,  
Like molten citizens of the vacuum?

Do you remember the children there like wicks,  
That constantly sparked their small gold? The town  
Had crowded into the rocket and touched the fuse.

The play upon the word "rocket" is an example of the kind of "condensation" and "compressing force" that Freud claims is part of "verbal jokes" in general (Freud 68). Here, "rocket" is the "one word which covers two thoughts" (Freud 49) in a "double-meaning" (Freud 40). Thus, comprehension of Stevens' peculiar play upon this word, provides for a double reading of the poem as a whole. Understanding that Stevens transports the "rocket" from war's domain to that of music, "we derive unmistakable enjoyment ... from being transported by the use of the same or a similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one..."(Freud 147).

The word "ovation" also tells a double "tale." As part of the tale of war, it designates "a ceremony attending the entering of Rome by a general who had won a victory of less importance than that for which a triumph was granted" (Webster's *TNID* 1605), like "Liadov's" "inferior cloud." As part of "Liadov's" tale of peace, it implies an "enthusiastic popular homage...or reception" accorded a musical performer (Webster's *TNID* 1605).

Anatoly Liadov's penchant for composing programmatic music makes him an emblem "of the imagination made in sound" (CP 346). His programmatic pieces encompass both the magically optimistic *The Enchanted Lake*, Op. 62, and the, at times, frightening symphonic poem *From the Apocalypse*, Op. 66, based on Chapter 10 of the Biblical book of *Revelations*. Stevens' Liadov, who "no longer remained a ghost" and who plays piano on his cloud, resonates with the angel in *Revelation*:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire. And he had in his hand a little book open: and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth, and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices.

"Liadov" plays a revelatory, synaesthetic music, "the colors of the ear," "epi-tones" which seem to be both musical pitches and chromatic color gradations (like the "rainbow" of *Revelation's* angel). "Epi-tones," a quasi-neologism on Stevens' part, could refer to tones imagined after the actual music. The description of Liadov's piano-cloud as "beau caboose" reinforces "epi"'s sense of anteriority, further underscoring the notion of anachronism. The poem simultaneously portrays the creative, intellectually explosive "instant of the change that was the poem" and the destructive, deadly explosion of a bomb. The "instant of the change" time-warps into pre-explosion and aftershock:

...It was part  
Of the instant to perceive, after the shock.

The fictive Liadov's "epi-tones" harken back to sound that is "archaic and hard to hear," particularly if the "epi-tone" is construed as Stevens' modern transcription of the word "epitonion," which was the small, ancient "aulos used for tuning instruments, ...or as a pitchpipe for the chorus."<sup>3</sup> Like a pitchpipe ("the chorister whose *c* preceded the choir" *CP* 534), "Liadov's" music, then, can set the tone for peace. Interestingly, Stevens underscores the importance of this role of the poet-musician in the final stanza, the only one containing an end-rhyme:

His epi-tones, the colors of the ear,  
The sounds that soon become a voluble speech-  
Voluble but archaic and hard to hear.

In "Two Tales," Stevens' musical joke is deadly serious. By portraying the composer, Liadov, anachronistically playing a musical device abandoned by Romantic and modern composers, Stevens orchestrates the idea that war is an atavism twentieth-century man should also abandon. Given the events of World War II during which "Two Tales of Liadoff" was published, the poem's anti-war stance becomes more apparent. As Liadov's audience, we are called upon to listen to his "rockets" as musical devices and imagine hearing this word devoid of its warlike overtones. Indeed, these "sounds" are "voluble but archaic and hard to hear."

Stevens' poetry often requires musical detective work. "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" (*CP* 357-358, 1947), another example of his skillful playing of musical jokes, requires the reader to undergo subtle self-modification through a process of free-

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<sup>3</sup>Solon Michaelides, *The Music of Ancient Greece: An Encyclopedia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1978) 108.

association.<sup>4</sup> Immediately, the title evokes principles of Newtonian physics: (1) a body in motion tends to stay in motion and a body at rest tends to stay at rest and (2) an object cannot be in two different states at the same time. The poem's season ("it is July") is that of hurricanes, suggesting that the motionless motion within the poem's chaos might be analogous to a hurricane's calm eye.

The rain is pouring down. It is July.  
There is lightning and the thickest thunder.

Suddenly, in a dream-like juxtaposition, the scene is a Wagnerian opera. The "lashing wind" is "the spirit of Ludwig Richter" and his overblown, confusing conducting motions. This invented character, "Ludwig Richter," a conflation of two names and two conducting styles, those of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) and Hans Richter (1843-1916), is, in itself, an anachronism.

On one hand, Stevens is alluding to the "chaos in motion" conducting style of Ludwig van Beethoven, known for his "lashing" movements on the podium. In fact Ludwig Sphor (1784-1859), one of Beethoven's contemporaries, criticized his "extraordinary" motions:

Whenever a sforzando occurred, he tore apart his arms, which he had previously crossed on his breast, with great vehemence. ...to increase the forte yet more he would sometimes, also, join in with a shout to

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<sup>4</sup>For example, the reader must perform a bit of free-association to make sense of the title, "Mountains Covered with Cats." One line in this poem provides a clue to understanding the title: "Freud's eye was the microscope of potency" (CP 368). Examination of the title of this poem with a Freudian free-association microscope, makes sense of it through a linguistic association that produces the phrase "It's raining cats and dogs," and interpolates the cat-precipitation into snow-covered mountains.

the orchestra without being aware of it. (H. Schonberg 59)

On the other hand, Hans Richter's style was very contained. In fact, Cosima Wagner complained in one of her diaries, "He sticks too close to his four-in-a-bar" (H. Schonberg 178). In this respect, Richter could be the chaos "not in motion" for even his mentor, Wagner, bemoaned his protégé's inability to "maintain the right tempo even when it had been achieved, simply because he is incapable of understanding *why* it should be thus and not otherwise" (Schonberg 178). Further, by conflating the two names, Stevens also cubistically telescopes events, for Hans Richter angered Ludwig II by refusing to conduct a performance of *Das Rheingold* on the grounds that the ...production...could not do justice to Wagner" (H. Schonberg 177). This conflation is an example of the "economy" of joke "condensation and fusion" discussed by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (23).

Instead of creating order out of chaos, Stevens, in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," creates chaos, distorting laws of physics as well as certain grammatical and poetic orders. The poem's first lines signal potential apocalypse:

Oh that this lashing wind was something more  
Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter...

Stevens violates the rules of his "gloomy grammarians in golden gowns" (CP 55) by not utilizing the expected subjunctive form, "were," in the poem's first line. Here, cataclysmic loss of desire is signaled by an abandonment of the subjunctive mood, that which

expresses willing, wishing, desiring. In this manner, the following lines are foreshadowed:

And Ludwig Richter turbulent Schlemihl,  
Has lost the whole in which he was contained,

Knows desire without an object of desire,  
All mind and violence and nothing felt. (13-16)

Stevens further wreaks havoc on poetic diction, subverting expectations by interjecting a word borrowed from Yiddish, "schlemiel." A "schlemiel," according to Leo Rosten, is "a foolish person...a clumsy, butterfingere, all-thumbs type" (425), hardly the conductor one would desire as the coordinator of the massive forces required for Wagnerian opera. Interestingly, the stolid conducting style of Hans Richter is portrayed in the strict iambs of the metrical scheme of lines 15-16, which are the poem's only two lines free of jarring rhythmic distortions. Humorously, the "lightning" of line four connects with the poor conductor, fictive Ludwig Richter, whose conducting style is "like the wind that lashes everything at once".

Ludwig Richter's "lashing" movements are comic to us because "they seem to us extravagant and inexpedient" (Freud 235). Freud tells us that we find the comic in exaggerated motion when we compare the motions of another person with those we would have made under the same circumstances. Thus, we laugh "at an expenditure that is too large" (Freud 235). Seeming to comment on the extravagant motions of Stevens' Ludwig Richter, "turbulent Schlemihl," Freud says, "And in the same way, the passionate movements of a modern conductor seem comic to any

unmusical person who cannot understand their necessity" (Freud 236).

Often in reading Stevens, one must make a connection across the blank spaces of the poem. Here, Stevens relies on the reader's associations to make a ribald connection:

The most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales.

And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl,  
Has lost the whole in which he was contained,

In Freud's terminology, this homonymic word-play results in a "tendentious" joke (107) of the "obscene" variety, the purpose of which is to expose the sexual part in question.<sup>5</sup> Here, word-play on the whole-hole and the suggestive gap created by the white space make us associate Ludwig Richter's desire to see the "whole [hole] in which he was found" with man's desire, in general, to discover his origins.

As if to provide the absent "whole"/hole, the poem contains many o's.

<u>Line</u>	<u>Words</u>
Title	cha <u>o</u> s/ <u>o</u> motion/ <u>o</u> not/ <u>o</u> motion
1	<u>o</u> h/ <u>o</u> something/ <u>o</u> re
3	<u>o</u> pouring
5	1 <u>o</u>
6	pe <u>o</u> ple/ <u>o</u> ut/ <u>o</u> wind <u>o</u> ws/ <u>o</u> wn
8	<u>o</u> t/ <u>o</u> g <u>o</u> w/ <u>o</u> ld
9	<u>o</u> o <u>o</u> fs
10	sn <u>o</u> w/ <u>o</u> und
11	co <u>o</u> lliding/ <u>o</u> ptical

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<sup>5</sup>Freud says: "Smut is like an exposure of the sexually different person to whom it is directed. By the utterance of the obscene words it compels the person who is assailed to imagine the part of the body or the procedure in question and shows her that the assailant is himself imagining it. It cannot be doubted that the desire to see what is sexual exposed is the original motive of smut" (116).

12	sopranos/songs
14	lost/whole/contained
15	knows/without/object/of
17	knows/nothing/more/about
18	once

These o's onomatopoeically render the hollow sound of the wind while visually suggesting musical "whole" notes. The tracing of them, like connecting dots in a children's drawing game, reiterates sounds that emphasize spiritual emptiness.

Ludwig Richter's knowledge of "desire without an object of desire" means that he once experienced desire but cannot now feel it. For a conductor to be "all mind and violence and nothing felt" would be disastrous, particularly in Stevens' schematic order, since "music is feeling...not sound" (*CP* 89). Underscoring this tragic loss of desire are the nostalgic first and last words of the poem, "oh" and "once," reminding us that Stevens was sixty-four when he wrote it. That Ludwig Richter is an alter-ego for Stevens is supported by Helen Vendler's observation: "In spite of the severe impersonality of Stevens' style, in spite of his (often transparent) personae, it is himself of whom he writes" (*Words* 11).

Massive Hans Richter would have been a good stand-in for the six-foot-two, portly Stevens. An apt figure for artistic emptiness, Richter, when asked how he felt about a particular piece he was conducting, replied, "I am not a critic...I conduct" (*Schonberg* 183). Is Stevens telegraphing fear of a loss of inspiration and his ability to communicate emotions, in his choice of series and scene--X,IV--as in "ten, four, over and out" at the end of a radio transmission?

Stevens makes another type of musical joke, consisting of the composer's embedding of his own name in the music by means of musical pitches or rhythmic values. For example, Bach spelled his last name through note equivalents, *B-flat*, *A*, *C*, and *B-natural*,<sup>6</sup> while Rachmaninov incorporated his name in the *Second Piano Concerto's* final cadence,<sup>7</sup> which beats out its syllables rhythmically. Dmitri Shostakovich first included his musical monogram *D S C H* (corresponding to the notes *D*, *E-flat*, *C*, *B*) in his *Tenth Symphony* (1953), to "assert his own identity" (Volkov xxxviii) in the midst of a work which contained a portrayal of the tyrant, Stalin.<sup>8</sup> In poetry, François Villon included his name as an acrostic in *The Testament*, in which the first letter of each line, when read downwards, reveals the poet's name. Similarly, in "Chaos in Motion," Stevens conjures up his own name in an interesting fashion, relying upon the reader's associative powers. The phrase, "the most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales," demands some free-association. Of what else, do we sing

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<sup>6</sup>This motif appears in the "Last (Unfinished) Fugue" of *Die Kunst der Fuge*. The first known mention of Bach's discovery that his own last name made an interesting musical motif is a dictionary entry under "Bach, Joh. Sebastian" in *Musicalisches Lexicon*. Leipzig: Wolfgang Deer, 1732, p. 64. Dr. Elinore Barber points out, "The B-A-C-H melody also appears as a counterpoint in the four-part fugue of the *Art of the Fugue*, and Bach 'signs his name' with the motive near the end of the six-part *Ricercar* of the *Musical Offering* and in the concluding measures of the *Canonic Variations*." "Bach and the Bach Motive," *Bach Quarterly Journal* 2.2 (1971): 3.

<sup>7</sup>Rachmaninov was fond of this device, using it in his *Piano Concerto #3* as well as other works.

<sup>8</sup>Shostakovich claimed of this symphony, "I did depict Stalin in music in the Tenth [Symphony]. I wrote it right after Stalin's death, and no one has yet guessed what the Symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo is a portrait of Stalin, roughly speaking." (Shostakovich in Volkov, Solomon. *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*. Trans. Antonina W. Bouis. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1979) 141.

songs? In childhood, we "Sing A Song of Sixpence," a nursery rhyme falsely attributed to a George Steevens (Opie 394-5). Moreover, through the allusion and its implied "blackbirds," Stevens further points to himself and his *oeuvre*, the birds being reminiscent of his own "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The following quietly cataclysmic moment in "Thirteen Ways" resonates with the tone of anxiety in "Chaos in Motion":

Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds. (CP 94)

Vendler says of "Chaos in Motion" that "the brutality of the poem is that it treats its own problem with indifferent irony" (*Words* 13). The relentless cycle of life and death is treated as a factual inventory of a quick and mechanical scene-change at the opera:

The rain is pouring down. It is July.  
There is lightning and the thickest thunder.

It is a spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,  
In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,  
Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,

The air is full of children, statues, roofs  
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,

Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains.

With a dream-like telescoping of events, time is compressed as in an opera/drama, and objects seem to spin and collide as if in a hurricane. Moreover, the "air" (tune) of this opera is "full of children," suggesting a scoring for children's choir.

Stevens spins us around in a confusing chaos. What are "deaf-mute churches" and "optical trains"? Does the phrase "deaf-mute churches" constitute a highly-charged emotional shorthand expressing modern man's sense of loss now that organized religion, which once heard and spoke for us, no longer holds meaning? Are churches and trains merely the "optical" illusions of stage scenery? Are these "trains" of thought based on the optical, sequential narrative of sight? In *The ABC of Relativity* first published in 1925, Bertrand Russell uses trains (80-84) as an example<sup>9</sup> when explaining the disturbing "new picture of the world" (64) wrought by Einstein's theory of relativity:

There is no longer a universal time which can be applied without ambiguity to any part of the universe; there are only the various "proper" times of the various bodies in the universe, which agree approximately for two bodies which are not in rapid motion, but never agree exactly except for two bodies which are at rest relatively to each other. (64)

As in "The Snow Man" (CP 9-10), Stevens, in "Chaos in Motion," masks his cosmic insecurity about epistemological matters by playing around with words homonymically containing "knows" ("snow, "nose,"). Methods of arriving at knowledge seem as ephemeral as "snow" in a world in which Newtonian physics is overturned by Einsteinian relativity. In "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," "massive sopranos" (emphasis mine) seem to weigh themselves with "scales" of their own "songs," even as, like armored Wagnerian *Walkyries*, they wear the selfsame scales by which they are weighed. Ultimately, the phrase "songs of scales"

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<sup>9</sup>Russell follows Einstein in using trains to illustrate relativity.

so defamiliarizes the word "songs," that "songs" seems a unit of measurement. By "making strange" in a formalist sense, the poem, in part, foregrounds and reexamines language as a means of inquiry.

"Songs of scales" are like meaningless exercises, notes that have "lost the whole" musical melody in which they are "contained." The "massive sopranos," like the uninspired Ludwig Richter, perform the ascending and descending scales of the music mechanically. Missing the vocal nuances to make melodic sense of the visual notes on the page, the sopranos render a lackluster performance of the "optical trains," a mere series of scales.

Ultimately, Stevens shows us that we must rely on the human faculty of associative memory in order to hear melody in what would normally be mere notes of a scale. We recognize the melody as a whole after it has been played to its conclusion, just as we catch on to Stevens' musical jokes after they have been played on us. In "Chaos in Motion," Stevens calls upon his audience's associative memory for the connections necessary to understand his quirky sense of humor.

A musical joke is also the basis of "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Since a clavier is a generic term for any keyboard instrument, including one used for silent practice, Stevens leaves his audience in ignorance as to whether the instrument used by Peter Quince for his blundering performance of seduction is the harmonium, clavichord, harpsichord, virginal, or some other keyboard instrument. Moreover, we are forced into complicitous groping at the outset when we hear the dissonance of the off-

rhyme of "Peter" and "Clavier," in actuality, both generic terms of a sort.

Speculation abounds as to which keyboard instrument Stevens intended for "Peter Quince." In "Variations on a Theme in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier,'" Michael O. Stegman suggests the possibility that Stevens, influenced by Scriabin's *Poem of Fire*, had the "*clavier à lumière*" in mind. Stevens' own title for the volume in which "Peter Quince" appeared suggests that the instrument might be the harmonium. Kinereth Meyer and Sharon Baris, without designating a specific instrument, provide the information that "the texture constituted by the instruments chosen for this poem: the clavier, strings, and winds" is part of the "process of realization... characteristic of the Baroque period" and "is particularly evident in this grouping of the trio sonata (typified by clavier, viols, or winds,) when the obbligato or main voices sing independently yet in counterpoint against a given basso-continuo line" (58). However, following Joan Richardson's cue to pay particular attention to the first and last words in Stevens' poems, I find that focusing on this poem's initial word, "just," reveals a pivotal key to the poem's meaning.

Just as my fingers on these keys  
 Make music, so the selfsame sounds  
 On my spirit make a music too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;  
 And thus it is that what I feel,  
 Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,  
 Is Music. It is like the strain  
 Waked in the elders by Susanna.

Protagonist Quince's connectors of comparison, "just," "so," "then," thus," "like" produce strange equations, "strain"[ed] logic:

Fingers on keys = Music

Same sounds on spirit = Music

∴ Music = Feeling ≠ Sound

Feeling in me (desiring you) = Music ≡ Strain in Elders  
(created by Susanna)

In nine lines, Quince makes four major modulations in idea, giving rise to some of the poem's "odd disjunctions" (Cook *Word-Play* 65) which "generate a plurality of difficult modern meanings" (Nyquist 311). Quince's forced comparisons are analogous to the violation of Susanna's privacy by the voyeuristic elders. Nyquist claims that Stevens betrays Susanna by abandoning her story before its denouement—Daniel's indictment of the elders for perjury and his exoneration of Susanna. Instead, he modulates to aesthetic questions:

Beauty is momentary in the mind-  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.

Astutely, Nyquist shows that there is a problematic shift from narrational to lyric modes (equally as disjunctive as the poem's striking dislocations of logic) which occurs with Stevens' omission of the story's continuation -- the separate questioning of the elders by Daniel. However, Stevens' omission is every bit as telling as a continuation of the narrative would have been, underscoring through its silent gap, a basic aesthetic problem which the reader must take up through the poem's implied questions: Like beauty, are truth and justice "in the eye of the beholder"?

It is as though the reader is put under oath as witness to both Quince's self-arousing performance and Susanna's auto-erotic bath, to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Significantly, Stevens rests his case in an aporia, a silence akin to a musical rest, pregnant with meaning. Like a blind man fitfully "tracing" an entrance to the poem's "portal" of understanding, the reader as witness must ask, "Is sight, faithful?", his question mirroring that which has to be determined about Susanna. Is Susanna an adulteress as the elders claim? It will become evident that attention to "the sound of the words" does justice to the poem's dislocations and to Susanna, herself.

Daniel arrives at the truth through attempts at corroborating the evidence. Ironically, his witnesses betray the truth that they did not see Susanna's alleged adulterous act by what they claim to have seen.<sup>10</sup> Stevens orchestrates the poem's disturbing "attendant" thoughts and questions with percussive "tambourines" and then with a jarring modulation, a leap in logical continuity across the synapse of the poem's white space:

And then, the simpering Byzantines  
Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

Beauty is momentary in the mind-  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.

And this is just the point - the poem plays a musical joke on its initial word, "just," linking the first recorded story of modern justice (Daniel's questioning of witnesses and corroborating the

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<sup>10</sup>Upon questioning each elder separately, Daniel discovers that their accounts differ as to the type of tree under which Susanna allegedly engaged in her extramarital tryst.

evidence with which to render a just verdict) with ideas of "just intonation." One key directing us through the poem's rude dislocations, disjunctions, and odd modulations is to imagine Quince playing on a keyboard instrument tuned to the old abandoned system of just intonation. Just intonation, with its pure-tuned intervals, rules out comfortable modulation to all keys. This system was abandoned in favor of equal temperament, the current system of tuning, which divides up the scale mathematically into twelve equal half-steps. Equal temperament, with its "democracy of the semitone,"<sup>11</sup> abandons pure intervals in favor of a temperament that will faithfully modulate into any key.<sup>12</sup> It involves:

Tunings of the scale in which most or all of the concords are made slightly impure in order that few or none will be left distastefully so. (Groves, Vol.18, 660)

This tuning system<sup>13</sup> in which all half tones "are created equal," resonates with the founding premise of the American system of justice in which all are equal in the eyes of the law.

In actuality, the Stevens household contained a piano tuned, in all probability, according to the modern system of equal

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<sup>11</sup>I am grateful to composer-arranger Ron Roullier for this aptly descriptive phrase.

<sup>12</sup>J. Fischer writes that the main advantage of the modern system of equal temperament, is that it allows notes to function in all keys equally well, thus allowing for the "various modulations employed in modern music, in which every possible harmony in every key is used" (128).

<sup>13</sup>J.S. Bach's *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* is based on the concept of a "circulating" temperament, one of "a number...propagated during the 17th and 18th centuries, and it is to them rather than to equal temperament that the well-tempered [in the title] rightly refers" (Randel 838).

temperament. Stevens wrote to his wife, Elsie, in August of 1913, "Do please decide in favor of the piano!" (LWS 181). Just two years before writing "Peter Quince," he did, in fact, buy the piano for his wife claiming, however, that it left his "bank account looking like an airship or balloon, rather on the way down!" (LWS 182).

The first order of business upon receiving the piano would have been to have it tuned. As lawyer and amateur musician, Stevens must have recognized the odd parallel between words used to describe justice and those used to describe the tempering of an instrument. Justice is that which is "consonant with what is...legally right." (*Black's Law Dictionary*, 5th Ed., 775), just as equal temperament makes the pitch of a piano's tones consonant or "suitable for all keys" (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*. 2nd Ed., 1877).

A remarkable similarity exists between some of the words/ideas of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and those of J. Cree Fischer in *Piano Tuning*, a work originally published in Philadelphia in 1907. These similarities, I believe, are not purely accidental. Fischer advises:

...the first thing to do is to place your rubber mute between two trios of strings...so that only two strings sound when the key is struck. Select some key near the middle of the keyboard. Strike the key strongly and hold it down. If the two sounding strings give forth a smooth, unwavering tone--a tone that sounds as if it came from one string, the unison is perfect. (76, emphasis mine)

Compare the above passage to this passage from "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (emphasis mine):

The winds were like her maids,

On timid feet,  
 Fetching her woven scarves,  
 Yet wavering.

A breath upon her hand  
Muted the night.  
 She turned-

Fischer writes that piano tuners are guided by beats, waves, and pulsations:

"These three words refer to one and the same thing, a phenomenon that occurs in certain intervals when two tones are sounded together that are not in exact tune. ...The rate of vibration of two tones not in a favorable ratio, may produce the phenomenon known as "beats, waves, or pulsations." (73)

Two strings, tuned in unison<sup>14</sup> (to the same pitch) will "give forth the same number of vibrations per second" and the "tone produced will appear to come from a single source; one sweet, continuous, smooth, musical tone...as though it were from a single string" (Fischer 151, 77). A "defective unison" (78) will produce "a throbbing, beating sound" (76). In the Apocrypha's Susanna tale, the "defective unison" that Daniel hears in the conflicting stories of the elders when questioned separately, sounds anachronistically in "Peter Quince" when "the basses of their [the elders'] beings throb" (emphasis mine). The questions raised by disjunctions in "Peter Quince," so disturbing to contemporary critics, bear striking resemblance to the uncomfortable residual "false waves" that plague the piano tuner. According to Fischer:

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<sup>14</sup>Stevens knew "what unisons create in music" (CP 280).

In the low bass tones, a kind of false waves are always present, and will annoy the tuner long after he has been in regular practice. (161)

"Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings" of the elders. Stevens plays with the homonymic resonance of the word "bawdy" = obscene. On one hand, he is distrustful of the unsound, unhealthy qualities of the sounds of words:<sup>15</sup> "music is feeling, then, not sound." On the other hand, he must trust the ability of these "selfsame sounds" to transmit (baud = unit of telegraphic signaling speed) "feelings."

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings  
Of those white elders; but, escaping,  
Left only Death's ironic scraping.

Here, Stevens leaves us in a confusing state of "being forced to give up our disjunctive either/or mode of apprehension and take on that of both/and, all..."<sup>16</sup>. "Death's ironic scraping" is orchestrated as a *danse macabre* for the "strings" of the elders who, according to the Susanna narrative, were given the death penalty.

Just as a word can function as different parts of speech (and hence hold different meanings) so, too, a particular note can hold different valences within various keys. For example, the note C functions as the tonic in the key of C-Major. Within this tonality, C would serve as a "home base" to which a melody returns, providing a feeling of resolution. However, C within another tonality (key), for example, G major, would function as the subdominant, producing an unsettled or unresolved feeling.

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<sup>15</sup>Joan Richardson, in her forthcoming article on "Peter Quince at the Clavier" mentions this point (*Southwest Review*).

<sup>16</sup>Richardson, *ibid*.

Moreover, a given note can be used in a pivot chord, a kind of fulcrum, enabling modulation into an altogether different tonality.

If Peter Quince is playing within the system of just intonation ("Just as my fingers on these keys..."), he cannot modulate fluidly to all keys. In just intonation, intervals are tuned so purely that they function well in some tonalities but fail miserably in others, producing "unbearable dissonance" and "throbbing beats" within certain chords (Fischer 99). Stevens translates this problem into words. The poem's initial word "just" takes on ambiguous multiple valences, depending upon interpretation, as if it were a note in a chord, rudely forced to function as a pivot in various modulations within the system of just intonation. If read quickly, "just as" sounds like "justice," thus announcing one of the major themes of the Susanna tale, the transition to the modern system of justice with its dependence upon corroboration of testimony by various witnesses. Secondly, "just," interpreted adjectivally, means "right, or true," belying the discordant music that the bumbling Peter Quince "make[s]." Moreover, "just" serves as an adverb to signal time: "just [now] as my fingers...make music." "Just," interpreted as the pivot in Quince's analogy, fails just as certain tones in just intonation do when used within the pivot chords of a modulation.

While a chord or progression of chords would sound extremely harmonious in the favored keys, they would be so unbalanced in the remote keys as to render them extremely unpleasant and almost unfit to be used. (Fischer 98)

Similarly, "then" in line four carries polyvalent<sup>17</sup> meanings: "Music is feeling, then, not sound." Does "then" suggest that the "feelings" are those of long ago, or is "then" the connector (∴) in a logical conclusion?

Stevens also pivots strikingly on the word "still." In line eleven, Susanna bathes in her "still garden," a metaphorical Garden of Eden. However, this is merely the stillness before a storm. Sounds begin to well up in the garden. As the elders watch Susanna, the initial sounds of desire are subtle and low, orchestrated as "throbbing basses" and "pulsing pizzicati." Bathing, Susanna finds "concealed imaginings," sighs "for so much melody," stands "upon the bank...in the cool of spent emotions," and feels the "dew of old devotions." After this autoerotic passage, she walks "upon the grass, still quavering" from the experience. Yet this "quavering," as in a musical trill (often the moment of suspension before a final cadence), *intimes* that she is unaware of the elder's presence. Stevens orchestrates Susanna's sudden awareness of the elders' voyeuristic intrusion with "crashing cymbals," "roaring horns," "tambourines" and clumsy rhymed couplets, in contrast to the previous free-flowing tercets.

If such words as "just" and "still" are ambiguous in terms of the part of speech intended, others are polyvalent by virtue of their homonymic quality or their repetition in different contexts. One such word is "dew."

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<sup>17</sup>Richardson claims that "not sound" can also be interpreted to mean "un-sound," meaning "unhealthy" as well as "not sound" in the sense that Quince's clavier, if interpreted as a soundless practice keyboard, would only produce imaginary sound. She also notes the polyvalence of the word "then," as used in this poem.

On the bank, she stood  
 In the cool  
 Of spent emotions.  
 She felt, among the leaves,  
 The dew  
 Of old devotions.

If we are sensitive to "the sound of words" (NA 13), we hear the multi-functionality of "dew/do." The meaning keeps "wavering" between the homonyms. The "dew" could be a release that Susanna feels in "old devotions." In contrast, it could also mean that after the "spent emotions" of her autoerotic experience ("she searched/ The touch of springs,/ And found/ concealed imaginings./ She sighed...), she guiltily feels the "do"/due of marital obligations. Since the Susanna story is never resolved within the framework of Stevens' poem, we experience a type of suspended sentence--the undecidability of meaning due to the poem's crucial multivalent words.

Another pivot word in "Peter Quince" is "clear":

Of a green evening, clear and warm, (I.10)  
 In the green water, clear and warm, (II.1)  
 On the clear viol of her memory, (IV.15)

Thrice reiterating the word "clear" lends a fairy-tale quality to the narration, for frequently in fairy tales, a word/act is said/performed three times (e.g. three wishes, three riddles which must be answered by the questing knight, and the like). In "Peter Quince," "clear" is repeated three times as if to remove magically the evil produced by the elders' false testimony. In other words, "clear" is reiterated as "magic" performative language to "clear" Susanna's name.

The phrase "clear and warm" acts as a mnemonic device. Similar to epic epithet, used in oral tradition for tagging long narratives, it is much like the reiterated "wine-dark sea" in *The Odyssey*. The last appearance of "clear," in "Peter Quince," transposes this word within a telling orchestration, "the clear viol of...memory." The key phrase "clear and warm" is the vial or container of the storyteller's memory. Stevens effects closure through allusion, for if the title of the poem refers to the Shakespearean character Peter Quince, the phrase "clear viol of...memory" in the poem's last section resonates with "a liquid pris'ner pent in walls of glass" from Shakespeare's fifth sonnet. In "Peter Quince," the word that waits the longest for its rhyming consummation is "melody," in line eight of section two.

She sighed,  
For so much melody.

"Melody" finally reaches its rhyming-cognate "memory" in the penultimate line of the poem, thus providing linguistic mimesis for the idea that a melody has an *ex post facto* existence, recognizable as an entity after it has been played to its logical cadence. Thus, in "Peter Quince," the word "memory" reaches back analeptically for its rhyming cognate "melody." Put synaesthetically, melody is aural hindsight.

Stevens, underscores the "faulty" memory of the intrusive elders with jarring orchestration and faulty parallelism:

A cymbal crashed,  
And roaring horns.

Moreover, the Susanna narrative as Quince's symbolic allegory (cymbal) of desire, "crashes." He fails to find an adequate

narrative to describe his own feelings, to find "what will suffice." Quince fruitlessly tries to make an analogy between desire and "the vague effect we feel when we hear music" (*LWS* 136).

Freud might have judged "Peter Quince" a "displacement joke," one which is to a high degree independent of verbal expression" (59). Rather, this "conceptual" type of joke "depends not on words but on the train of thought" (Freud 59). Thus, the poem's word "just" bears a clue to Stevens' "train of thought," enabling us to understand that his musical joke is a "displacement" of the idea of just intonation from the realm of music to the sphere of words.

By translating a musical tuning concept into words, Stevens shows the difficulty of translation in general--the disruptions that occur as a result of the attempt to equate that which is unequal, a process that inevitably leads to loss. No translator can ever fully equate words in one language with those in another. Similarly, Quince is doomed to err in trying to equate feelings with music, and further compounds the mistake by trying to translate both feelings and music into words. The textual dissonances produced by these attempts are orchestrated by Stevens' analogy of attempting to play music which modulates on an instrument tuned in just temperament.

We fail to translate completely what our soul experiences: there is no common measure between mind and language. (Bergson 164-165)

Ultimately, the obnoxiously intrusive sound of the trumpet and the *or* sounds in "roaring horns" underscore the reason that symbols crash; too many undecidable meanings (either/*or*'s) oscillate

within the poem's many pivotal words: "just," "then," "still," "clear," and "due."

Through Daniel's justice, Susanna was cleared of all charges of adultery. However, her rights to privacy were severely violated. Stevens orchestrates this concept in the poem's final lines.

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings  
Of those white elders; but, escaping,  
Left only Death's ironic scraping.  
Now, in its immortality, it plays  
On the clear viol of her memory,  
And makes a constant sacrament of praise. (emphasis added)

Further, with his orchestration of the "viol" for Susanna, Stevens playfully embeds his wife's middle name, "Viola" in the poem.<sup>18</sup>

Though many critics have conjectured as to the type of keyboard instrument Stevens intended by the generic clavier, they have failed to notice that the term "viol" is equally as ambiguous. The "viol" family contained many types, sizes, and timbres of instrument.

The terminology of the viol family during the sixteenth century was varied and at times extremely confusing. The generic word 'viola' (viol) included two quite different instruments, the viola 'da braccio' (i.e. the 'arm viol') and the viola 'da gamba' (i.e. 'leg viol'). Few writers before the middle of the century, however, used either modifying phrase. (Groves 739)

Viols became, for the most part, extinct by the mid-eighteenth century when modern stringed instruments supplanted them. The only extant instrument bearing vestiges of the construction and

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<sup>18</sup>As noted by another critic, Stevens' embedding of Elsie's middle name is akin to the cartoonist Hirschfeld's embedding of "Nina" within his drawings.

underhand bowing method of the viol family is the string bass (double bass). If Susanna plays on the bass viol (vile, too?), is Stevens punningly suggesting that she is, in some way, base like the elders?

Stevens sends us into a complex time warp, leading us to hypothesize further that Susanna plays on the ancient viol, an instrument that, interestingly enough, did not yet exist in her day. He adds to this confusion, having been aware that "there were no Byzantines in Susanna's time" (*LWS* 250). These many time dislocations are Stevens' way of portraying in words, the difficulties of musical modulation when just tuning is employed in place of equal temperament.

Unlike contemporary stringed instruments, the ancient viol did not have a soundpost. Recalling that the French word for "soundpost" is *âme* and that Stevens felt that "French and English constitute a single language" (*OP* 202), the lack of an *âme* (soul), as a known feature of Susanna's instrument, lingers after the poem's conclusion like a rich overtone. With this orchestration, Stevens suggests that immortality lies "in the flesh," the "abstraction blooded," rather than in the notion of a soul. Just as successive living embodiments of the idea of beauty render beauty "immortal," so too, the successive renditions on instruments fulfilling the generic categories of clavier and viol make the abstract notations of music immortal. Moreover, the composer/poet and the performer/reader are co-creators of the "beauty" of the poem's "immortality."

Stevens returns to the idea of justice ("just") with the third to last word of the poem, "sacrament," the ancient definition of which bears a residue of legal meaning:

Sacramentales: compurgators; persons who came to purge a defendant by their oath that they believed him innocent. (Black's Law Dictionary, 5th Ed., 1198)

Stevens casts his audience as witnesses to the Susanna incident, "compurgators," participants in the musical joke, and listeners jolted by the rude dissonances produced by Peter Quince's performance in just temperament. The poem requires complicity, a willingness to modulate consciously with Quince through some difficult intellectual pivots. As part of the "wave, interminably flowing" (*CP* 92), we participate in a continuous stream of consciousness (James *Prin. Psych.* 219). Rather than say, "he thinks" or "she thinks," it would be more accurate, according to James:

If we could say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that *thought goes on*. (*Prin. Psych.* 220)

"Susanna's music" is a score which Stevens invites anyone to play and a game that calls for linguistic associative playfulness. Instead of claiming that Stevens plays musical jokes on us, perhaps we should say, as does the end of "Peter Quince": "Now in its immortality, *it plays...*".

#### IV. "A Million People on One String"

Some men see things as they are and say, "Why?"  
I dream things that never were and say, "Why not?"  
(Robert F. Kennedy)

The ability to "transform" the sounds of an instrument into many different things is one mark of a good recording studio musician. The "sleight-of-hand" cellist can produce the ominous minor second growling shark-leitmotif for *Jaws*, the soaring lyrical melody of Superman's flight, or the screechy swoops<sup>1</sup> of *Halloween III*'s terror. Jay Berliner, a prominent contemporary studio guitar/banjo/ mandolin/ukulele player, exemplifies this ability. Once, when the appropriate instrument was not available, Berliner "transformed" his banjo into a koto for a Japan Airlines television commercial. Thus, the studio musician is a kind of orchestrator, using the correct "color" for the effect desired. In Stevens' language, he "finds what will suffice" (*CP* 239).

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar"(1937), the poet says, "Throw away the lights, the definitions,/ And say of what you see in the dark/ That it is this or that it is that." He challenges us to listen closely, in order to understand how the substance of the world is transformed through poetry. On the Japan Airlines commercial, we hear Jay Berliner's altered banjo as the quintessential koto when we see film clips of pristine airplanes, lovely geisha-like stewardesses, and sushi hors d'oeuvres. Similarly, Stevens requires us to listen to the sounds of the blue

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<sup>1</sup>The commercial studio musician calls this type of quick, descending glissando, a "fall-off."

guitar's transformations by seeing with the mind's eye. Though the audience asks the guitarist to "play things exactly as they are," the guitarist-poet shows how "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar."

In one of his letters, Stevens says that "the only possible order of life is one in which all order is incessantly changing" (*LWS* 291-292), reflecting the ideas of Emerson:

There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid  
and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.  
(403)

Depicting a universe in a constant state of flux, "a blooming, buzzing confusion" (Wm. James *Prin. Psych.* 462), "The Blue Guitar" plays a tune of nature's endless metamorphoses.

Slowly the ivy on the stones  
Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields  
And men in waves become the sea.

It is the chord that falsifies.  
The sea returns upon the men,

The fields entrap the children, brick  
Is a weed and all the flies are caught,

Wingless and withered, but living alive.  
The discord merely magnifies. (XI.1-10)

When the guitarist claims, "A mountainous music always seemed / To be falling and to be passing away," he parallels the erosion of great mountains with that of monolithic ideas of past centuries worn away by new scientific discoveries. To "tick it tock it and turn [this new world] true," modern man would have to accept that the Newtonian clockwork universe no longer "suffices"

as an adequate description in light of Einsteinian relativity. New discoveries about what is thought to be an expanding universe, the "jocular procreations of space," demand a fluid world view. "The Man with the Blue Guitar" transforms the  $C$  of Einstein's famous equation into the sea as "a form of ridicule" (XXVII.9), mocking our attempts to master the universe's forms through "iceberg settings." "The Blue Guitar" underscores the many fluid and fluent forms of "the sea":

It is the sea that whitens the roof.  
The sea drifts through the winter air.

It is the sea that the north wind makes.  
The sea is in the falling snow.

The gloom is the darkness of the sea.  
Geographers and philosophers,

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

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

The demon that cannot be himself,  
That tours to shift the shifting scene.<sup>2</sup>

Time and the shifting seasons change man and his environment, rendering inaccurate static descriptions of the universe, reflected by the improvisatory nature of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." It is not the polished formal eighteenth-century "serenade" desired by the crowd, but rather a "rhapsody" stitched together through thirty-three seemingly disjointed sections or cantos.

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<sup>2</sup>The last two lines of this passage conjure up Milton's Satan: "I am hell, which way I fly is hell."

Harold Bloom (*Poems of Our Climate* 115) points out that "[T]he Blue Guitar' is a very American poem, and deliberately so." Helen Vendler highlights "the monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar" (*EW* 124) evoked by the poem's limited syntax and vocabulary. However, these critics fail to point out the uniquely American twang in the poem's reiterated "r" sounds (contained in the many are-guitar rhymes), one marker of American English. Moreover, though Alden R. Turner underscores the poem's home-grown, "folk," "improvisatory," or "blues" character (47,48), he fails to show how the poem's dominant tetrameter lines indeed suggest the four-bar phrases of either a blues melody or a folksong ballad, nor does he explore the ways in which the Stevensian guitar recreates blues music acoustically. Stevens effectively reproduces the peculiar "qualities of timbre employing rasp or growl techniques" (Groves 813) common to blues music.

To bang it from a savage blue,  
Jangling the metal of the strings...(III.9-10)

He orchestrates blues guitar effects with "buzzing," "chattering," "lazy, leaden twang[ing]," "chop[ping]," and "strumming" (IV.10, V.12, VIII.9, XVIII,5 respectively). The tone of "The Blue Guitar" delineates blues emotions. It has the "soul" of an angry "animal" or of one in pain (XVII.3,4) even as it speaks an "articulate" language with its "claws" (clauses, too) and "fangs" (XVII.6, 5) in rasping, growling blues timbres.

Translating pain into subtle sabotage, blues music takes the fixed reality ("things as they are") of standard European diatonic

tonal structure and "bends" it, flattening the pitches of the third, seventh, and sometimes fifth scale degrees "according to the performer's instinct and expression" (*Groves* II.812). If this "discord merely magnifies," it is because its microtonal bending of notes deliciously underscores the set structure in which they are heard. In his microtonal alterations of the musical universe, the player of the blue guitar illustrates how "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar" (I.6). "Changed" onomatopoeically renders strumming technique even as it intones the infinitesimal manner (like pocket change) in which the guitarist alters his world.

Vendler recognizes the poem's "minimal vocabulary" and says that Stevens appears to be "restricting himself on purpose," illustrating how he creates the poem's cantos out of a few simple words that "are varied, repeated, and expanded" (*EW* 126, 125). However, she and Turner fail to point out that this simple vocabulary and the "insistent resurgence of other talismanic phrases" (Vendler, *EW* 124) are Stevens' way of suggesting blues music. Blues were largely the creation of "illiterate musicians" (*Groves* II.813). Like the *rhapsodos*, his Greek counterpart who "sings a hero's head" in epic form, the blues musician employs simple patterns and repetitions which aid memory. The "Blue Guitar's" recurring words and phrases imitate the typical blues stanza in which the second line is often a repetition of the first, ostensibly giving the performer-composer time "to improvise a third, rhyming line while singing the second" (*Groves* II.813).

This "monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar [with its] repetitive downbeat of 'things as they are' and 'the blue guitar'

with all their variations" (Vendler *EW* 124) serves to show how the basic materials of poetry and music as well as the elements of the universe can be recombined into new forms. The variations in thought that occur during the thirty-three sections of this poem are Stevens' way of orchestrating an Emersonian conception of Nature:

Nature is an endless combination and repetition of a very few laws. She hums the well-known air through innumerable variations. (243)

Thus, the "shapes you take" are like the simple elements of blues music, recycled to comprise a very individual performance.

The blue guitar is a shape changer. Though the title of the poem indicates two separate entities, "man" and "guitar," these two elements take many forms during the course of the poem as they play in dialectic tension. In their permutive and combinatory transformations, both the man and the guitar seem like Stevens' much-admired polytropic Odysseus.

In stanza one, guitar and performer are separate and an audience makes demands on the performer-composer: "Play you must,/ A tune beyond us, yet ourselves." The audience's request sets up the poem's important contrast between reality and imagination, between the tune of us "as we are" and one that is "beyond us." It is the same contrast with which the poem ends: "The moments when we choose to play/ The imagined pine, the imagined jay." The poem's basic dialectic, then, is between, what I term here, *rooting* and *soaring*. The green pine tree represents an earthbound rooted reality tinged with longing or "pining" for a "beyond[ness]." The blue jay represents the soaring imagination.

In our new-found "unsponsored free[dom]" (CP 70), we can "choose to play" various colors. William James had shown how the act of smiling or frowning can make us happy or sad at will (*Prin. Psych.* 1077). Stevens suggests that even our thoughts may take on the colors of moods we choose to wear like actor's robes:

The color like a thought that grows  
Out of a mood, the...robe

Of the actor...  
...the dress of his meaning...

This very color of emotion is compared to "the weather of his stage, himself." With Hamletesque overtones, Stevens puns with the weather/whether of the actor's physical stage/stage-of-life which becomes the very matter of subjectivity, "himself." The either-or quality of the homonymic pun "weather" and the idea that "all the world's a stage" underscore the idea of choice throughout the poem. It is possible either to pine for a beyondness or to pick out the weather of one's emotional climate the way a guitarist picks out an "air" on his instrument. The guitarist cannot "bring a world quite round" but he can: (1) "patch" it or "sing" parts of it ("I sing a hero's head"); (2) "play" out the thoughts of its inhabitants as in "Ah, but to play man number one...to lay his brain upon the board" (like an instrument's sounding board); (3) "pick the acrid colors [of man's thought] out" on his guitar; and (4) use music to appeal to his audience's nobility ("And reach through him almost to man") (II.1,2,3; III. 1,3,4; II,6).

If to serenade almost to man  
Is to miss by that, things as they are,

Say that it is the serenade  
Of a man that plays a blue guitar.

Again, realizing the misrepresentation inherent in the audience's request to play "things as they are," the guitarist strums a familiar Emersonian theme:

What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking,  
planting, counting man, does not, as we know him,  
represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we  
do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is...(387)

The phrase "to miss by that, things as they are" not only underscores the fear of misrepresentation, but orchestrates the idea that pining for the *status quo* makes one miss the chance to wed imagination to reality--to fulfill the potential of becoming more than:

...creeping men,  
Mechanical beetles never quite warm. (VII.6-7)

The blue guitarist, a "shearsman of sorts," "jangles" and clips "the strings" (III.10) that bind us as "fantoche[s]" to a puppeteer's crucifix-like "cross-piece on a pole" (XXX.2, 7). Stevens' guitarist changes the "strings" of his instrument into imaginative umbilical cords linking man in community with other men - "heavy cables, slung/Through Oxidia" (XXX.8-9) - power lines charging us "to electrify the nimbuses" and transform the "banal suburb" of "Oxidia" into "Olympia" (XVI.10). The guitarist's question, "A million people on one string?", bears a double meaning: Is it possible for me to bring people together using the pathetic resources of my guitar?; and Need we consider ourselves as puppets controlled by a god? The idea of man as a mere puppet

alters the color of the guitar from the soaring imagination's blue to the pale cast of limitation: "poor pale, poor pale guitar" (XX.8).

Emerson emphasizes that all circles of understanding eventually become limiting and must be superseded to accommodate new facts of experience.

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning... This fact, symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect, around which the hands of man can never meet. (403)

Resonating with Emerson, stanza two of "The Blue Guitar" emphasizes the fragmentary nature of artistic mimesis which can never represent the whole world but only a piecemeal version of it:

I cannot bring a world quite round,  
Although I patch it as I can,

I sing a hero's head, large eye  
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Here, appropriately, the guitar is merely one piece of the performance, an instrumental accompaniment rather than a self-sufficient solo instrument. The orchestration matches the *emblazon* fashion in which the performer sings the praises of parts of a hero, fragmented and decapitated, one who is "not a man" because only his heroic qualities are being extolled.

Stevens signals his challenge to and undoing of old mythologies by narrating an implausible reverse sequence of events. In an inverse Biblical parody, the old hero is first killed ("To drive the dagger in his heart") and then crucified ("To nail his thought across the door,/ Its wings spread wide to rain and snow"). Realizing that "the key to every man is his thought" (Emerson

404), the guitarist uses music's "ambiguous undulations" to dissect thought and to unlock the brain's "colors": "pick the acrid colors out."

Section four starts with: "So that's life, then; things as they are?/ It picks its way on the blue guitar." However, the guitar sounds "like a buzzing of flies in autumn air," orchestrating the idea that "nail[ing] thought" in a fixed position, would only serve to destroy the freshness of mind-as-process. "Mind" can be a verbal noun. Like the shark, it must stay in motion in order to survive. Stevens recognized that the thoughts of modern man must not become "fixed" but must change in order for man to recover the nobility which, within old systems of mythology and religion, had been his.

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)

Stevens recognized that obsolete notions of heroism could no longer be maintained in the midst of ever more destructive weapons of war. Appropriately, he uses blues "buzz" sounds to underscore the decayed remains of non-productive patterns of thinking. Section four's death is then followed by burial in section five's "underground...vaults."

In order to resuscitate man's noble spirit and reposition him within the universe:

#### Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place  
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,

Even in the chattering of your guitar.

In stanza six, the displacements continue as the phrase "ourselves in poetry" becomes "ourselves in the tune as if in space." This stanza's reiterations and displacements of the words "space" and "place" underscore "of"'s ambiguity in "the thinking of God is smoky dew." The phrase oscillates in meaning between man's thinking of/about God as clouded reasoning and God's murky thinking in creating an unexplainable universe. Emerging from this clouded thought, the blue guitar's imaginative air repositions itself "beyond the compass of change," deftly able to shift music from a temporal to a spatial realm: "The tune is space." The guitarist's air (tune) evolves, during the course of the poem, into the twentieth-century's naturalized heaven, "space."

air (IV. 8)  
 empty heaven (V.10)  
 space (VI. 3, & 12)  
 sky (VIII.1)  
 air (IX.2)  
 wind (xviii.8)  
 air (XX.8)  
 sky (XXII.10)  
 inaccessible utopia (XXVI.10)  
 air (XXVIII.10)  
 wind (XXVIII.10)  
 wind (XXX.3)  
 no place (XXXI.8)  
 space (XXXII.5 & 6)

The "composing of senses of the guitar" is the attempt to fuse sense/"reason" with senses/sensation and to achieve a reconciliation between thought as controlling performer and action as instrument. If the poem's protagonist thinks in terms of the duality of performer and instrument, then his performance is

lifeless. Performer and instrument contend with one another. Thus, in stanza seven, when the protagonist opposes the sun and the moon, becoming "detached" from the oneness of the universe ("stand[s] remote" from his world), the performance will fail: "The strings are cold on the blue guitar" (VII.14).

In stanza eight, the "Gold antagonists in air" represent the kind of duality which hinders the guitarist from achieving harmony with his instrument and subject matter. In a truly great performance, the musician seems to evade chronological time and feels one with his instrument and the music. Stevens' guitarist (VII) finds this unity difficult to achieve, even describing his lackluster performance in terms of binaries--passion and coldness:

And the feeling heavy in cold chords  
Struggling toward impassioned choirs,

The guitarist compares his "lazy, leaden twang" to "the reason in a storm." Achieving a sort of Coleridgean resolution of discordant forces, the performer-composer "know[s]" that his twang will lead to reason which instructs us to be realistic and practical (e.g. to run for cover in a thunder storm) while the reason behind the storm seems as irrational as the storm's force. The guitarist's song "brings the storm to bear" by arriving at a new, lucid understanding of natural forces which bear no traces of former mythologies. Stevens' description of the stormy sky breaks down into an intentional pun: "overcast" (IX.1) = "over" + "cast" -- bearing too many obsolete deities. Infusing the natural world with crippling archaic mythologies reduces the performer and deprives him of possibilities for action unconnected with a God-ordained

destiny. When "the blue guitar/ Is a [set] form [of thinking] described but difficult," the guitarist is deformed, "merely a shadow hunched/ above the arrowy, still strings." Like the "arrows of outrageous fortune," these strings contain the "arrows" of archaic and controlling gods. The guitarist is "the maker of a thing yet to be made" (IX.6). He must remold man as himself but "beyond" himself, tapping into his inherent nobility rather than deriving it from a god.

Stevens orchestrates the death of God with instructions to "toll a bell/ And clap the hollows full of tin." We are commanded to destroy the "form" of the old blue guitar ("poor, pale guitar") representing archaic, limiting ideas, in steamroller fashion: "Roll a drum upon the blue guitar." Recognizing that he is his own worst enemy ("Here am I, my adversary"), the soaring self, free enough to dispense with obsolete mythologies, "confront[s]" the vestigial self by "hooing the slick trombones." "Hooing," the jeering sound produced by the trombonist's smooth sliding through a series of pitches, orchestrates ambiguity homonymically (*who-ing*) and underscores man's uncertain future in the absence of comforting mythologies. With a powerful "leaden" (*lead in*) twang, the guitarist, in playing the "prelude" to the "end" of god(s), also intones his own heavenless death.

Ever the prelude to your end,  
The touch that topples men and rock.

The "twang" is not merely a nonsense onomatopoeic transcription of the guitar's sound, but a significant orchestration meaning the pulling of the string of a bow in shooting an arrow (*OED XVIII.737*).

This gesture symbolically allows the guitarist-poet to wage war on outdated structures of thought and belief. Emerson emphasized this project as necessary for human survival:

The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance,--as, for instance, an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite, --to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions. (404-405)

In stanza ten, not only has the drum "roll[ed] upon the blue guitar," it has also "roll[ed]" the performer and instrument into a unity: "Tom-tom, c'est moi." In this phrase, Stevens combines verbal colorings with orchestration to underscore his ideas. He juxtaposes the verbal drama of the Romance borrowing, "c'est moi," with the crude native instrument, "tom-tom." This coupling allows two ideas to resonate harmoniously: the fall of the French monarchy, "l'état c'est moi" with Thoreau's "different drummer." The guitarist can go about "picking" a new "state" of mind. "Iterative" words tend to produce a comic effect (Borroff 44). Thus, listening to this line with an ear to orchestration, we hear the abrupt entrance of the "tom-tom" at the epiphanic moment of union of performer with his instrument as a humorous undermining of the assertion: "the blue guitar/ And I are one" (XII.1-2). Ironically, this disjunction between performer and

instrument is underscored by its resonance with Flaubert's "Madame Bovary, c'est moi."

However, Emma Bovary's aristocratic waltz undergoes downward mobility, becoming a rather pedestrian "hall" filled with "shuffling men" moving to the sounds of an "orchestra." Stevens then distills the "whirling noise" of the waltzing "multitude" into the sound of the guitarist's "timid breathing" (XII.5-6). By conflating Romance borrowing ("c'est moi") with orchestration ("tom-tom"), Stevens has his guitarist "Play a tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (I.8). The guitarist plays both the abstract (state/"l'état"/"multitude") and the individual (person), artfully orchestrated with the native tom-tom whose very name, to borrow Borroff's term (51), is "sound-symbolic" of an individual heartbeat.

Stevens transforms the "noise of a multitude" into the important individual "breath" (XII.4,6). Yet that breath is part of the universe, as the musician-guitarist begins to discover his place in "the whole of harmonium."

Where  
Do I begin and end? And where,  
  
As I strum the thing, do I pick up  
That which momentarily declares  
  
Itself to be I and yet  
Must be. It could be nothing else. (XII.7-11)

The guitarist has shifted from a mocking and questioning (who-ing/"hooing the slick trombones") of the hero's "eye," representing the outmoded vision of a destiny-controlled self, to the momentous discovery of "I" as a thinking actor. The rooted "eye" sees the world as it is whereas "I," the soaring sense of self, discovers the

freedom to change "things as they are." The guitarist-singer's "breath" is like the individual voice in a democracy, subject to and subject matter of its people.

...Be content

Content to be...

Here, the chiasmus, with its ever oscillating accentual pronunciation of "content," creates a soaring mobius air-strip of language in which we are perplexed by the word's changes. The poem discovers that we are change, itself, and renders us no longer "subject to change" (*CP* 520). Prior to this moment of balance, the guitarist is unable to hold discordant paradoxes in "solution." Thus, he considers "the pale intrusions into [the] blue" of his guitar as "corrupting pallors." Parenthetical song lyrics ("ay di mi") foreshadow, through punning homonymic transcription and consequent subject-object oscillation (I + die + me), the guitarist's discovery that he can actively color himself and his world.

Once his mind is able to hold contradictions in solution, the guitarist-"man" is free to imagine simultaneously the pointed "star," a prosaic (rooting) description, and the rounded "orb," a poetic (soaring) description, in one "atmosphere" of thinking (*XIV.304*). If his thinking is binary, a black and white "chiaroscuro" that comprehends in terms of opposing forces, the guitarist is a sedentary performer rather than a moving serenader:

In a chiaroscuro where  
One sits and plays the blue guitar.

By orchestrating the guitar's sound for the reiterative syllable ("pic"), Stevens questions this stable picture (rooting) by storing some soaring energy within words containing the element of choice

("pick") within them. Here, his transcription of the guitar's sound as "pick," rather than "twang" or some other onomatopoeic syllable, orchestrates freedom.

Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard  
Of destructions," a picture of ourselves,

Now, an image of our society?

The guitarist recognizes that "things as they are have been destroyed." Ultimately, the universe cannot be pinned down to a static description but must always be in the process of being described. Aware that "every thought is a prison also" (Emerson 424), Stevens underscores a deathlike static world view by having his guitarist play "Good-bye, harvest moon." He corrupts the original song lyrics by bidding farewell to the moon rather than bidding the moon to continue shining, "Shine on harvest moon."<sup>3</sup> Binary thinking closes off paradox with:

Is the spot on the floor, there wine or blood  
And whichever it may be, is it mine?

Sedentary or binary thinking renders the fecund earth an unproductive "stone" (XVI.1). As such, it is not a fertile "mother" but rather an "oppressor" (XVI.4):

...that grudges them their death,  
As it grudges the living that they live. (XVI.5-6)

Writing poetry that is vital to living people means allowing old forms to die, providing breathing space for new ones. Otherwise, rooting reality conflicts unreconcilably with soaring imagination:

To live in war, to live at war,

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<sup>3</sup>"Shine on Harvest Moon." Words and Music by Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth, Remick Music Corporation, 1908. Stevens noted to a correspondent that he had this song in mind (*LWS* 783).

To chop the sullen psaltery, (XVI.7-8)

Explaining this particular orchestration, Stevens said that "to chop the sullen psaltery" meant "to write poetry with difficulty" (*LWS* 360). The difficulty stems from the burden of conforming (rooting) to old structures of thinking rather than discovering appropriate new forms that "will suffice" for modern man's needs. Vacillating between new and old thinking, the guitarist's lyrics in Stanza XVIII rhyme and resonate nostalgically with the Biblical "King of Kings":

A dream no longer a dream, a thing,  
Of things as they are...

While the monotonous continuance of "things as they are" paralyzes the mind, it is compared to a physical numbing produced "after long strumming" which "gives the touch of the senses, not of the hand" (XVIII.6). By portraying the paralysis that ensues from the monotony of the status quo, the guitarist underscores the need for change: "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them" (Emerson 413).

The guitar's "mould" in Section XVII, paradoxically suggests both the staleness (mold) of clinging to old ideas and the "top of the head" (archaic meaning, *Webster's TNID* 1476 ), symbolizing the imagination to create a new "mould." Humorously, the modern guitar's "mould" (XVII) is the template for its Renaissance predecessor, the lute which appears two stanzas later.

That I may reduce the monster to  
Myself, and then may be myself

In face of the monster, be more than part

Of it, more than the monstrous player of

One of its monstrous lutes, not be  
Alone, but reduce the monster and be,

Two things, the two together as one,  
And play of the monster and of myself,

This transformation of the guitar into a lute occurs magically, as though accomplished with the previous section's mirrors: "mirroring of cliffs,/ Rising upward from a sea of ex." These Scylla and Charybdis-like mirrors pull upward and outward ("ex") like contractions, giving birth to the archaic lute as a temporary sound incarnation for the blue guitar. A recapitulation of an earlier theme, "Here am I, my adversary," occurs when the hero's battle instrument, a lute ("lute" conjures up "lutter" = "to fight" in French) melds with his adversary "monster," uniting them in perpetual constructive combat. By the end of the stanza, the confrontation is framed in soaring ("lute") and rooting ("stone") terms:

Being the lion in the lute  
Before the lion locked in stone.

Time moves forward again, as the lute produces the next section's "good air" (tune) as well as its musical heir, the guitar. Again, the passage contains both imagination's soaring ("air") and the place of rooting ("there"), harboring the "air" sound of soaring within it.

What is there in life except one's ideas,  
Good air, good friend, what is there in life?

...Friendlier than my only friend,  
Good air. Poor pale, poor, pale guitar...

This section's "pale guitar," with its ensuing ellipsis, fuses its identity with the first lines of the following section:

A substitute for all the gods:  
This self, not that gold self aloft.

In a rooting movement, the substance of men and the earth ("the flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone") replaces defunct gods and heaven: "Man must become the hero of his world" (*CP* 261).

Alchemistically transmuting "flesh, bone, etc." into something more than mere description of "things as they are," the imagination promptly reverses and crosses these elements in its "universal intercourse" :

...sun's green,  
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

Imagination that can visualize the sun's color as green<sup>4</sup> because the sun greens plants, can also picture a feeling earth and a thinking sky. The blue guitar's "chattering" (V.12) has become articulate in "universal intercourse" (XXII.12).

In Section XXIII, Stevens scores the soaring-rooting dialectic as a "duet/With the undertaker." There is an either/or ("ether") quality to the word "undertaker," both as one who buries the hero and as the active hero undertaking a mission. They are mixed momentarily in a homogenous "solution":

A few final solutions, like a duet  
With the undertaker: a voice in the clouds,

Another on earth, the one a voice  
Of ether, the other smelling of drink,

The voice of ether prevailing, the swell  
Of the undertaker's song in the snow

---

<sup>4</sup>Joan Richardson points out that green often appears to be the sun's actual cast at dawn and at dusk.

The cloud "voice" consists of "ether," once believed the substance of the heavens." As if to illustrate Emerson's phrase, "time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts" (240), "ether," in Stevens' poem, synaesthetically distills into a "song in the snow." Though the earth voice smells of drink, its substance partakes of heaven's ether since both "drink" and "ether" contain alcohol. The insomniac's breath (the "breath that lies awake at night") of Section XXII.6, becomes:

...grunted breath serene and final,  
The imagined in the real...

...all  
Confusion solved, as in a refrain

One keeps playing year by year,  
Concerning the nature of things as they are.

The monotonously repeated musical refrain, "things as they are," seems to refrain from unsettling this "solution." However, its imperfect cadence in the final couplet's uncomfortable near-rhyme ("year-are") upsets the stability of the "final solutions." In the next section, the finality of death is overturned with the appearance of "the hawk of life." Thought which had been pinned to a door (III.5) in a procedure akin to the Pennsylvania Dutch custom of similarly nailing a hawk, is resuscitated. The guitarist may be bound by public constraint to play things as they are, but his thoughts remain free:

A hawk of life...

To meet that hawk's eye and to flinch

Not at the eye but at the joy of it.  
I play, but this is what I think.

In Section XXV, the imagination's resurrection, which enables the poet to hawk (sell) life the way he sees it, allows him to achieve universal balance in miniature. The performer magically spins the world, like a balanced top, "upon his nose." Emerson claimed that our "axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque" [sic] (47). Stevens' guitarist-poet knows ("nose" = *knows*) that he must spin the reality of the world around a constantly adjusted axis. This kind of deft adaptation of thought enables him to become "a native in this world/ And think in it as a native thinks" (XXVIII.1-2). Intoning the fecund thinking that has led to this discovery, a phallically fat thumb (akin to Stevens' own fat guitar-playing digit?) "beats out" a new refrain, "ay-yi-yi", which fuses (1) rooting: the earthy agrarian Pennsylvania Dutch expression<sup>5</sup> with (2) soaring: a suggestion of the refrain of the Spaniard's song of the sky, "Cielito Lindo." The guitar's percussive "beat" harkens back to the earlier imperfect unification of performer with instrument: "Tom-tom, c'est moi/ The blue guitar and I are one." But now the guitarist, like a "liquid cat" (XXV.5) that always lands on its feet, understands and deals deftly with the world's changes: "The cats had cats and the grass turned gray/ And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way." The syntactical embedding of "I" ("ai") in this line recycles it within eternal flux.

In Section XXVIII, the universe inhabits/influences the mind of the guitarist who is "a native in this [ever-changing] world." He discovers that the mind has contradictory identities. Like light,

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<sup>5</sup>Stevens comments on this expression (*LWS* 784).

which is both wave and particle, mind is not a singular identity—a  
mind:

It could not be a mind, the wave  
In which the watery grasses flow

And yet are fixed as a photograph,  
The wind in which the dead leaves blow. (XXVIII.7-  
10)

If the mind is tuned to the ever-changing universe, then its  
thoughts express reality:

And things are as I think they are  
And say they are on the blue guitar.

In Section XXIX, the earlier "duet with the undertaker" is transformed into "nuptial song." The "cathedral," symbolizing a repository of old ideas of "things as they are," "balances" now with what is "beyond" it. The guitarist's song has played out the harmonic tension between soaring and rooting and comes to a temporary resolution "know[ing] that the balance does not quite rest" (XXIX.11) and thus, the church bells (static noun), in this passage, are orchestrated as the bellowing (verbal) of bulls.

Yet this incessant movement and progression which all things partake could never become sensible to us but by contrast to some principle of fixture or stability in the soul. Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides. That central life is somewhat superior to creation, superior to knowledge, and thought, and contains all its circles. For ever it labors to create a life and thought as large and excellent as itself; but in vain; for that which is made instructs how to make a better. (Emerson 412)

Intoning this "eternal generator," the guitarist sings about the kind of imaginative power that can "electrify the nimbuses"

(XVI.10) and ameliorate life on earth ("to improve the sewers in Jerusalem" XVI.9):

Oxidia is the soot of fire,  
Oxidia is Olympia. (XXX)

In this passage, "Olympia" seems to undergo an oxidation in the loss of one of its letters ("m"), the suggestive transformation of the "y" (why) to its acoustical equivalent ("i"), and the inversion of its downwardly pointing "p" to its upwardly shifted "d." In this brilliantly orchestrated chiasmus, the guitarist shows us that heaven is on this ever-changing, renewed earth: "Without electricity the air would rot" (Emerson 549).

Signaling the shifting of gears between sections that has led to this realization, "a blunted player clutche[s]/ The nuances of the blue guitar" and understands that all attempts to harmonize reality with the imagination are inadequate and temporary: "Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions" (Emerson 552). The poet's patchwork rhapsody is always a "compos[ed]...droll affair" of "employer" (the public that asks for a song of "things as they are") and the "employee" (the guitarist who tries to play a visionary dream of "things as they will be by and by." The guitarist realizes that a balancing act or patching job is the best that can be expected. Man will always be repairing old concepts to mesh them with new discoveries. As Emerson remarked in "Nature," "The poet must be a rhapsodist: his inspiration a sort of bright casualty: his will in it only the surrender of will to the Universal Power, which will not be seen

face to face, but must be received and sympathetically known"  
(126). Stevens' guitarist comes to the conclusion:

It must be this rhapsody or none,  
The rhapsody of things as they are.

The poem ends in Section XXXIII<sup>6</sup> with the redemptive thought that we can "choose to play" various songs and parts because the "crust of shape" is a polytropic "shell," like the "mould" of the guitar. The "monster" (related to the French "montrer" = "to show") in the "lute" has demonstrated that reality takes many "shapes."

...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.

The blue guitar "surprises" (XXXII) us by showing how we are never more ourselves than when we are the ever-changing "natives" in a fluid universe:<sup>7</sup>

We call these millions men; but they are not men.  
Half-engaged in the soil, pawing to get free, man needs  
all the music that can be brought to disengage him.  
(Emerson 1033)

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<sup>6</sup>Possibly by ending on stanza 33, (symbolizing the years of Christ's life), Stevens is underscoring the insufficiency of both the Bible and his own poem as final "solutions" while suggesting that we continue revising our ideas about the universe.

<sup>7</sup>"Yet Franciscan don was never more/ Himself than in this fertile glass." (CP 181, XIX.15-16)

## V. "Invisible Audience"

Where now sounds the persuasion, that by its very melody imparadises my heart,  
and so affirms its own origin in heaven? (Ralph Waldo Emerson 84)

The musician differs from the painter, the dancer, or the writer in that his efforts can be overheard by others, whether intentionally or not, before he is ready. Stevens had compared the writer's meditations to the practicing of a musician, "a thought to be rehearsed all day" (CP 247). But though a writer can polish his work in private before releasing it in finished form, the musician is not quite so fortunate. To borrow and misuse a term from the stock market, his work is public before he decides to "go public."

In "Things of August" (CP 489), "no note fails," as if the poet, thinking aloud, is figured as a musician overheard practicing when rusty ("disused ambit of the soul"):

These locusts by day, these crickets by night  
Are the instruments on which to play  
Of an old and disused ambit of the soul  
Or of a new aspect, bright in discovery

The poem describes a musician's practice, his "trying out" or testing approaches on an instrument in order to decide which ones work best, which ones he will "keep."

Nothing is lost, loud locusts. No note fails.  
These sounds are long in the living of the ear.  
The honky-tonk out of the somnolent grasses  
Is a memorizing, a trying-out, to keep.

Here, and elsewhere throughout his *oeuvre*, Stevens likens the routine of writing poetry to musical practice, considering himself "a philosopher practicing scales on the piano" (CP 488). The rigorous, daily work of devising fingerings and articulations, and

making muscles conform to an ideal sound that exists in the mind, parallels the kind of work a poet does: "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (*OP* 201).

If a man writes a little every day, ...it may be that he is merely practicing in order to make perfect. On the other hand he may be practicing in order to get at his subject. (*OP* 244-245)

"The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Mozart 1935" illustrate the curious lack of privacy during a musician's practice. The public invades the privacy of the musician/poet when it demands, as it does in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "play you must," or commands a performance in "Mozart 1935" by saying, "Be seated, thou."<sup>1</sup> The first line of "Mozart 1935" fuses the extemporizing poet with the improvising composer: "Poet, be seated at the piano." The poet is put in the position of a musician forced to compose and perform simultaneously. The public, upon hearing the young Mozart practicing arpeggios, "throw[s] stones upon the roof." Paradoxically, it commands the performer to "play the present" while ignoring the present -- "the body in rags" which is being carried "down the stairs." The disapproving public descends step by step bearing a corpse while Mozart practices ascending, leaping arpeggios. This contrary motion intones the contrast between the public's demands for expression of the "present" condition of "things as they are," and the poet-pianist's personal agenda which is keyed to the future: "one of the motives in writing is renewal" (*OP* 226).

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<sup>1</sup>Joan Richardson points out that this command could be interpreted as the voice of the poet.

Cubistically collapsing time, Stevens simultaneously portrays Mozart as both the young pianist playing "rags" and the pauper's corpse "in rags" being carried "down the stairs." Mozart's age at death (thirty-five) is embedded in the date of the poem's title, "Mozart 1935." Oddly, within this time-collapse, he is called upon to play his own ragtime requiem while being jeered for his apparent cheerful obliviousness to his own poverty-stricken end.

If they throw stones upon the roof  
While you practice arpeggios,  
It is because they carry down the stairs  
A body in rags.

This temporal cubism is further reinforced by the painterly use of the words "present," "past," and "future" on the canvas of the poem.

Play the present (2)  
That lucid souvenir of the past (10)  
That airy dream of the future (12)

While the male performer of "Mozart 1935" plays an instrument and is an avowed prodigy, the female performer of "The Idea of Order at Key West" is the embodiment of her instrument, the voice, and performs "beyond the genius of the sea." The voice is female, hidden, and organic "like a body wholly body," whereas the piano in "Mozart 1935" is male, overt, and mechanical. Auditory voyeurism characterizes both poems, as though the public listens to the poet thinking aloud or practicing. In "Mozart 1935," the hostile over-hearers make demands on the performer--demands that are unsatisfied at the poem's conclusion. In the "Idea of Order at Key West," however, the audience, which makes no demands on the performer and is presumably unnoticed

by the singer, is, nonetheless, touched by her singing. "The singer is not just vocalizing (singing without words) since her performance contains "word by word" lyrics. Her words, as in *Genesis*, conjure a world of ideation into existence. In contrast, wordless instrumental music in "Mozart 1935" can only produce a vague semblance of meaning that is purely emotive rather than intellectual, "that wintry sound/ As of the great wind howling."

These distinctions indicate the difference between the demands the public makes on the musician and the private agenda of the musician, himself. Interestingly, in both poems, the audience is touched by a performance that was not intended to be public. In "Mozart 1935," the public is moved to hostile agitation while overhearing the composer "practic[ing] arpeggios." In "The Idea of Order," however, the listeners gain a peaceful sense of natural order while harkening to the woman singing for her own gratification as she walks by the sea.

Both "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "Mozart 1935" display the tension between public and private by weaving a polyrhythmic texture of juxtaposed lines of regular iambs and lines that are jaggedly irregular. Iambic rhythm (./) easily represents that which is public or universal because, as Leonard Bernstein aptly observed, "physical life is duple" (91), consisting of the systole and diastole of our hearts beating, the inhalations and exhalations of our lungs breathing, the left and right movements of our legs walking, and the night and day cycles of our sleeping and waking: "It is time that beats in the breast" (*CP* 329).

And so, two-legged creatures that we are, we walk left-right, left right into the art of music. That's why most music has duple meter, which means two beats per bar or some multiple of two beats per bar...(Bernstein 91)

Modernists enjoined poets to "make it new," stating that "first heave" in the mission of modern poetry was "to break the pentameter." Ezra Pound exhorted poets (*Poetry* March 1913) "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome."<sup>2</sup> Stevens, however, claims the public form of the iamb for idiosyncratic personal lyric use in a remarkable modernist "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" (H. Baker xvi) in both "Mozart 1935" and "The Idea of Order." In part, this deformative modernist appropriation of public form for private use is what he means when he instructs the performer to "make sure/ The audience beholds you, not your gown" (*CP* 427).

One way of decreating and renewing iambic pentameter was to employ "a new logic of music that would have appeared unthinkable to the masters of the past" (Stravinsky 35). New free verse forms, much like the tonal experimentation of modern composers, still recognized that "what survives every change of system is melody" (Stravinsky 38-39). Igor Stravinsky's description of "melody" parallels Robert Frost's notion of fundamental "sentence sounds" (Frost 261). Referring to twentieth-century tonal experimentation in music, Stravinsky wrote, "Modality, tonality, polarity are merely provisional means that are passing by, and will even pass away." He observed, "What

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<sup>2</sup>Ezra Pound *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1963) 3.

survives every change of system is melody" understood as "the musical singing of a cadenced phrase" (38-39). Modern composers discovered "poles of attraction...no longer within the closed system which was the diatonic system" and other means of bringing these "poles together without being compelled to conform to the exigencies of tonality" (Stravinsky 37).

Wallace Stevens also agreed that "the dated forms (of music of poetry) are intolerable" (NA 124). Recognizing that the old music of "metrical poetry with regular rhyme schemes repeated stanza after stanza" with "all of the stanzas alike in form" had become obsolete, he claimed that "...there has been a change in the nature of what we mean by music" in poetry (NA 125). Resonating with Stravinsky's observation that "cadenced phrase[s]" of melody survive the changes in musical systems, Stevens noted that "music today" in poetry "contains rhymes at irregular intervals and it is intensely cadenced" (NA 125). He framed the difference between the old regular stanzaic poetry and the new in musical terms:

It is simply that there has been a change in the nature of what we mean by music. It is like the change from Haydn to a voice intoning. (NA 125)

Robert Frost called this natural cadence of poetry's new music "sound-posture," "sentence sounds," or "the sentence of sound" (261). Illustrating that it is the "sentence sounds that underlie the words" that are "instinctively" understood, he gave the example:

...of two people who are talking on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the

listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. This is because every meaning has a particular sound-posture; or, to put it in another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with and without at all being conscious of the exact words that are being used is able to understand the thought, idea, or emotion that is being conveyed. (261)

In general, Wallace Stevens' poems utilize this kind of "sense in sounds beyond their meaning" (*CP* 352). Therefore, literary analysts who refuse to *listen* to "the sound of the words" of Stevens' poetry also fail to catch the significance of his orchestrations of idea. For example, while understanding that "Mozart 1935" "...is burdened with the sense that suffering people need a new and appropriate performance by the poet," critic Mark Halliday misses the nuances of that very performance, feeling that this poem is too removed or "estranged" (13) from "the varieties and gradations of experience" and that it ignores the "cries" of real people suffering from the devastating effects of the Depression in America, "totalitarian oppression" abroad (13), and the ensuing world war in Europe. In excoriating Stevens' supposed social obliviousness in "Mozart 1935," Halliday fails to hear the ways in which personal pain bleeds through blank verse in ragged lines of jagged irregularity.

/ . . / . / . . / .  
Poet, be seated at the piano.

/ . / . . / / /  
Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,

. / / / . / . /  
Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,

. / . . / . / .  
 Its envious cachinnation.

The spirit of "the present" is captured through syncopated rhythms. The phrase "play the present," for example, mimics a rhythmic motif ( $\frac{2}{4}$  ♩. ♩| ♩. ♩.) prevalent in Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, evoking its innocent optimism and poignantly underscoring the theme of dreams denied those suffering in the street. Considered in light of a comment Stevens made in one of his letters, this rhythm also cues composer-poets to follow their private aesthetic rather than the dictates of the public.

I had the usual Sunday evening listening to a good deal of Dvorjak (phonetic spelling which does not look quite right). For all his skill and humanity and charm he lets one down. I suppose that full of the desire to please he failed nevertheless to realize that the conscientious artist must please himself, regardless of anything else. (LWS 692)

Halliday is critical of the "nonsense syllables" in the poem, claiming that they "erect a blank wall of sound between the poet and the real human cries in the street" (14). Stevens chose these supposed "nonsense" syllables carefully. His old friend Arthur Powell recalled:

In February, 1935, we were at Key West again; and his poem "Mozart 1935" ...was forming in his mind. In the second and third lines, for sound effect, he uses the phrases, "hoo-hoo-hoo," "shoo-shoo-shoo," and "ric-a-nic." I now have in my possession a scrap of brown paper, a piece of a heavy envelope, with written on it in his own handwriting: "ses hurlemente, ses chuchotments, ses ricaments/ Its hoo-hoo-hoo,/ its shoo-shoo, its ric a nic."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Peter A. Brazeau, "My Dear Old Boy": The Wallace Stevens-Arthur Powell Friendship," *Antaeus* (Winter, 1980), 156, 157.

Halliday claims that Stevens' poem remains "in generality, abstracting countless instances of suffering into simple terms--a body in rags, fear, pain, cries" and that it merges "individual others into one generalized image, so that the distinctive traits of individuals can be ignored" (15, 22). However, the *sound* of the poem, to which Halliday does not attend, infuses it with a specificity of grief not easily accomplished by other means. Stevens' scoring penetrates the substance of pain with the poems' pervasive wailing sounds: (1) *oh* in such words as "piano," "throw," "arpeggios," "divertimento," "concerto," "snow," "sorrow," "old," and the name "Mozart," itself, (2) *oo* in such words as "hoo-hoo-hoo," "shoo-shoo-shoo," "souvenir," "you," "lucid," and "roof," (3) *ow* in such words as "down," "unclouded," "sound," "howling," and the word "thou," repeated five times.

These sounds virtually enact a lament, disguised in the loud boisterous laughter of "cachinnation." This word, in turn, constitutes a telling *breakdown pun*: *cache* (French) = hide + a *nation*, signalling laughter's flimsy concealment of a nation's pain. Halliday criticizes Stevens' "inclination to meld cries with laughter, as if from the poet's distance all human noises sound the same" (14).

Stevens uses stodgy iambs to portray the disapproving public whose angry response to the poet's seeming obliviousness to human suffering, is framed thus:

. / . / . / . /  
If they throw stones upon the roof

The public's action of carrying a body is also portrayed in iambs while Mozart's poverty-stricken corpse, itself, is depicted with irregular rhythm:

. / . / . / . / . /  
It is because they carry down the stairs

. / . . /  
A body in rags.

Further, the public expects its "sorrow" to be dispelled in three regular iambs:

. /  
released,  
. / . /  
Dismissed, absolved

Much like the "idiot minstrelsy" heard in the "bethous" of the bird-choristers of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the public's demands are framed as the reiterated words "Be thou," ambiguously pivoting in scansion between trochee and iamb. This ambiguity underscores the odd request that the poet be the "voice of angry fear," a term which unites cringing with potential retaliation.

. / . /  
Be thou the voice,  
. / . / . /  
Not you. Be thou, be thou

Teetering on the fault line between sound and sense, "Mozart 1935" displays the precarious balance between the the private "unheard music" of the assertive "iamb" (*I am*), and the heard music of the directive "Be thou." Paradoxically, in order to fulfill the public's expectations, the pianist must make of his instrument

a "voice," a demand that the mechanical instrument be the perfect embodiment of corporeal pain.

. / . / . /  
The voice of angry fear,

. / . / . / . /  
The voice of this besieging pain

. / . / . /  
Be thou that wintry sound...

Earlier criticism has not attended adequately to the poem's reiterated "thous." Milton Bates calls it "the lofty pronoun 'Thou'" (169-70) and Mark Halliday claims that in this reiterated use of "thous":

Stevens does not want the poet to become a person among others, a "you" among "yous"....Stevens requires an artist abstracted from -- and thus, we may suggest, protected from the mass of injured egos and competing claims out there where "the streets are full of cries." (15)

Actually, in Mozart's time, "thou" (nominative form) and "thee" (dative and accusative form) were not considered "lofty" pronouns. "Thou" was "originally used in token of respect in addressing a superior, but later to an equal, and ultimately generally" (*OED* xx.765).

*Thou* and its cases *thee*, *thine*, *thy*; were in OE used in ordinary speech; in ME they were gradually superseded by the plural *ye*, *you*, *your*, *yours*, in addressing a superior and (later) an equal, but were long retained in addressing an inferior. Long retained by Quakers in addressing a single person, though now less general; still in various dialects used by parents to children, and familiarly between equals, esp. intimates; in other cases considered as rude. (*OED* XVII.981)

"Thou" is such a common device in poetic apostrophe (*OED* XVII.981) that to ignore the precedent of the nineteenth century and call Stevens' specific use of it "lofty," is absurd. Moreover, considered in light of his familiarity with the Pennsylvania Quakers, it is more likely that Stevens intended a Quaker-like egalitarian use of the word "thou" to designate the poet as "central man." Physical pain and human suffering are equalizers, reducing one to the core of the human condition. In fact, in the margin to his letter commenting on the "Be thous" in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (*LWS* 438), Stevens wrote "Tutoyez-moi," indicating the French familiar form of address.<sup>4</sup> His use of "thou", rather than constituting a "blurring of various experiences together so that they can be summarily described by a simple flattering term" (Halliday 22), is an attempt to illustrate the universality of pain and grief. In Stevens' terminology, if "thou" is in any way "lofty," it is so, not out of an impervious disdain for others, but rather an addressing of that which is "noble" within us so that we may endure through painful times.

As noted in the opening chapter, a change in the music of an era signals a change in mentality, just as "a variation between the sound of words in one age and the sound of words in another age is an instance of the pressure of reality" (*NA* 13). Mozart's "lucid souvenir[s] of the past," "the divertimento" and "the unclouded concerto," are sublime reminders of our inherent nobility. The reiterated "we"s seem stumblingly nostalgic for a "return" to

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<sup>4</sup>Helen Vendler draws attention to this bit of marginalia in her discussion of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (*EW* 176).

Mozart's music while underscoring the times and mentality that have sadly changed without improving.

We may return to Mozart.  
He was young, and we, we are old.

The knowledge of the impossibility of return is buried within us just as the word "know" is buried within the poem's *breakdown puns* ("piano" and "snow"). "Mozart 1935" turns on a poignant anachronism, the genteel eighteenth century Mozart pictured in troubled 1935. Like the great, black ragtime pianists who could not read music but could "voice" their pain and joy through the complex, jagged, syncopated rhythms of ragtime, Stevens' poet-pianist plays the music of the downtrodden. Willa Cather, in *My Antonia*, models the abilities of her blind, black character, Samson, after these often itinerant musicians.<sup>5</sup> She relates the incident in which Samson first found his "voice."

Through the dark he found his way to the Thing, to its mouth. He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. It was cold and hard, and like nothing else in his black universe. He ...began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. He seemed to know that it must be done with the fingers, not with the fists or the feet. He approached this highly artificial instrument through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him.  
(120)

Cather describes the rhythmic vitality of the pianist as he learns to command the instrument:

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<sup>5</sup>Stevens knew and greatly admired the works of Willa Cather, writing, "She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality" (*LWS* 381).

He was always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses--that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly. ...It was as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped up on those black-and-white keys, and he were gloating over them and trickling them through his yellow fingers. (120)

Stevens' poet-pianist is called upon to be "the voice" of poverty and pain. "The voice" is reiterated three times as if to exorcise or "shoo-shoo-shoo" the public's "pain" and "sorrow." The poet-pianist uses ragtime syncopations to smooth the way for a more cheerful frame of mind. Familiar with the works of William James, Stevens would have understood how the act of smiling or frowning can influence mood, and that "whistling to keep up courage is no mere figure of speech" (*Prin. Psych.* 1077).

On the other hand, sit all day in a moping posture, sigh, and reply to everything with a dismal voice, and your melancholy lingers. ...we must assiduously, and in the first instance cold-bloodedly, go through the *outward movements* of those contrary dispositions which we prefer to cultivate. The reward of persistency will infallibly come, in the fading out of the sullenness or depression, and the advent of real cheerfulness and kindness in their stead. Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key, pass the genial compliment, and your heart must be frigid indeed if it do not gradually thaw! (James *Prin. Psych.* 1077-78)

In "Mozart 1935"'s only line of strict iambic pentameter, the public paradoxically demands expression of rough times in smooth iambs, belying the high emotional valence of its subject matter.

. / . / . / . / . /  
 Be thou the voice of this besieging pain

Rather than "muffling the apprehension of others' pain" (Halliday 16), the deliberately orchestrated tension between iambic and irregular lines within the poem shows a recognition that the inherited forms of language, "sentences and paragraphs are usually structured so as to muffle the tonal modulations of speech" (Poirier *P&P* 151) and, for that matter, deep emotions. Aware that regular meters and stanzas tend to repress and trivialize strong feeling, Stevens employs syntactic tactics to foreground and underscore the problematical relation differentiating private emotion and public expression. Like jazz's "dissociation of rhythm from beat" (V. Thomson 38), "Mozart 1935"'s polyrhythms orchestrate the disparity between pain and its means of expression. Straying from the prevailing public duple beat, these rhythms, like syncopations in general, borrow time from the expected strong beat in order to accent the weak, "rob from the rich and give to the poor." Stravinsky describes the effect that jazz rhythms produce:

Who of us, on hearing jazz music, has not felt an amusing sensation approaching giddiness when... a solo musician, trying persistently to stress irregular accents, cannot succeed in turning our ear away from the regular pulsation of the meter drummed out by the percussion. ...What strikes us most in this conflict of rhythm and meter? It is the obsession with regularity. The isochronous beats are in this case merely a means of throwing the rhythmic invention of the soloist into relief. It is this that brings about surprise and produces the unexpected. On reflection we realize that without the real or implied presence of the beats we could not make out the meaning of this

invention. Here we are enjoying a relationship. (28-29)

Generally, "Mozart 1935" illustrates the way in which the tension between the regular beat (iambic lines) and "rhythmic invention" (free lines) can produce "sentence sounds" bearing significant overtones. "Mozart 1935"'s "body in rags" metamorphoses into the ghostlike "body wholly body" of "The Idea of Order at Key West," which Angus Fletcher deems "an elegy without a dead body." If, indeed, "poetry is the subject of the poem" (*CP* 176), "The Idea of Order" performs a kind of prosodic forensics upon poetry's "body in rags." But though "The Idea of Order" so clearly announces its own iconoclasm by "singing beyond the genius," its elegiac models shimmer luridly and lucidly beneath the surface. Genealogical resemblance flashes between the Old English "Seafarer" and such heavily alliterated lines as "Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry." Vowel play in "she sang beyond the genius of the sea" resonates with Milton's "Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more/ Ye Myrtles brown..." of "Lycidas." Irregularly rhymed "Lycidas," with its metric experimentation and incorporation, appears to lend "The Idea of Order" some of its unusual prosodic coloring. But unsaddened bereavement lies in the "unsponsored free[dom]" of Stevens' lines:

...for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

These lines create intertextual dissonance with Milton's certainty in "blest kingdoms" and orders of "Saints above" that "entertain" the dead Lycidas: "That sing, and singing in thir glory move."

Through disturbing caesural mimic commotion, Milton folds death in on itself—"For *Lycidas* is dead, dead ere his prime," and Stevens resonates with eery echoes—"Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry."

"The Idea of Order" begins with two lines of memorable iambic pentameter.

. / . / . / . / . /  
She sang beyond the genius of the sea.

. / . / . / . / . /  
The water never formed to mind or voice

These lines set up the expectation that the poem will continue in this manner.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the delicious tension between iambic and free lines and their interweaving throughout the poem illustrates Stevens' personal mastery and deformation of this meter. In elucidating how civilizing forms "mastered the night and portioned out the sea," the poem harbors the message that these forms may be manipulated for personal use and eventually changed. Stevens' epistolary comments on "The Idea of Order" reveal his overall vision of what poetry can accomplish:

It may be that every man introduces his own order into the life about him and that the idea of order in general is simply...a fortuitous concourse of personal orders. But still there is order. ...But then, I never thought that it was a fixed philosophic proposition that life was a mass of irrelevancies any more than I now think that it is a fixed philosophic proposition that every man introduces his own order as part of a general order. These are tentative ideas for the purposes of poetry. (*LWS* 293)

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<sup>6</sup>"The normative dominance of pentameter will persist in a passage of verse until it is deposed by another norm established against it..."(Easthope 61).

Critics, such as Richard Poirier, point out that the American pragmatists "recognized language as a form of knowledge that was also a form of repressive power" (*P&P* 135). The pragmatists felt:

...that language, and therefore thinking, can be changed by an individual's acts of imagination and by an individual's manipulation of words. (*P&P* 135)

"The Idea of Order" experiments with manipulation of scansion, pulling against the regular public duple beat and foregrounding that tension, thus heightening general awareness of order and moving the imagination to change the existing order of reality.

Stevens tells us, "To impose is not to discover," and shows that our responsibility as an audience is to listen carefully for the "concealed imaginings" (*CP* 90) of "the voice that is great within us" (*CP* 138), impossible to find if we dictate the performance. The singer in "The Idea of Order" is an unselfconscious performer upon whom the public makes no demand. Rather, the public's consciousness expands when it allows itself to be infiltrated by the woman's voice, a voice which reorders "words from the sea":

Words, of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds."

Critics have pointed out similarities between "The Idea of Order" and Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." However, the poems differ significantly. Whitman mimics the rocking motion of the waves through reiterated dactyl-trochee patterns:

/ . . / . / . . / .  
Out of the cradle endlessly rocking.

Stevens' sea sound consists of: (1) repetitive sibilants in the alternating of "she" and "sea," reminding one of the children's tongue twister: "She sells sea shells by the seashore" and (2) oscillation between lines of regular iambic pentameter and lines containing eleven syllables of irregular meter. Whereas Whitman's poem contains two "characters": a child and a bird who "chants," Stevens' poem contains three: the female singer, the male Ramon Fernandez, and an unnamed, genderless narrator. Whitman's child-protagonist is "project[ed]" by the birdsong into his newly-discovered poetic responsibility.

O you solitary singer, singing by yourself, projecting  
me,  
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease  
perpetuating you,

This nascent poet is a passive mouthpiece of the sea/nature, as evidenced by the poem's last line: "The sea whisper'd me." In contrast, Stevens' solitary female singer is the active "maker" and artificer."

Significantly, there are only three decasyllabic lines in the whole "Idea of Order," and they underscore the difference between the inarticulate "cry" of the "grinding" ocean and the masterful artistry of the singer. The ocean merits one decasyllabic line emphasizing its inarticulateness: "The meaningless plungings of water and the wind" while the singer's mastery is highlighted by the two decasyllabic lines contained in the following passage (emphasis added):

***She was the single artificer of the world***  
In which she sang, and when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self

***That was her song, for she was the maker.  
Then we***

The sea does not dictate the material of the song, but instead is "merely a place by which she [the singer] walk[s] to sing." The sea's sounds are portrayed visually on the page as a senseless mirror through doublings of the words "body" and "cry," which is, perhaps the consummate word for the inarticulate (emphasis added):

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
***Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,***  
That was not ours although we understood,  
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

Here, Stevens inverts the Genesis creation story in which the seas form upon God's performative speech act, since "the water never form[s] to mind or voice" during the woman's song. The sea's "empty sleeves" conjure up the magician's phrase, "See, nothing up my sleeves." Indeed, the singer's creative act effects a transformation of her listeners by "enchanting night."

The woman's song makes sense of nature which otherwise would be devoid of the mind's needed "demarcations" (*CP* 130) or ever-expanding Emersonian "circles." Nature, without humans to note it, would be like the "deep air" of an unperceived, seasonless universe:

If it was only the dark voice of the sea  
That rose, or even colored by many walls:  
If it was only the outer voice of sky  
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,  
However clear, it would have been deep air,  
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound

Repeated in a summer without end  
And sound alone. But it was more than that...

In part, a cognizant human being measures time and understands its meaning as evidenced through its effect on his body. Like the "frets" used to divide the length of a musical instrument's string into pitches, people are "frettings on the blank" of the universe (*CP* 397). The poet, too, provides frets on the blank page by his appropriation of blank verse.

Musical instruments, as Paul Valéry strikingly observes, are really measuring instruments (*Art* 189). They measure tonal pitch. Thus, the singer's voice sounds and measures the world around her.

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.

"The Idea of Order"'s narrator-audience turns to his companion Ramon Fernandez-critic, asking him how the song gives us a sense of order, thus helping us to understand and appreciate nature.

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.

Like the sea's tides, melodies pull away from and gravitate towards a center, called the tonic. The tonic is like a home base to which the melody returns, providing a sense of order and peaceful resolution.

"The Idea of Order"'s "fiery poles" resonate with Stravinsky's description of the topography of music:

A system of tonal or polar centers is given to us solely for the purpose of achieving a certain order, that is to say more definitely, form, the form in which the creative effort culminates. (*Poetics of Music* 41, emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

Stravinsky explained modernism's abandonment of traditional tonal systems: "we no longer believe in the absolute value of the major-minor system based on the entity which musicologists call the *c*-scale" (*Poetics* 37); "times have given way to a new age that seeks to reduce everything to uniformity in the realm of matter while it tends to shatter all universality in the realm of the spirit in deference to an anarchic individualism" (*Poetics* 74). Poets living in this same climate of spiritual and aesthetic anarchy were changing the very nature of poetry with free-verse experimentation. Serious questions of belief in the face of new scientific discoveries rendered invalid the traditional system of explaining man's place in the universe. Significantly, as the woman of "The Idea of Order" sings, her listeners ask "often," "Whose spirit is this?" This uncertainty undermines the assurance in *Genesis* that the "Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" during the ordinary creative act.

The woman's "striding" by the sea and singing is Stevens' expression of the self as an embodiment of nature, a cue that the poet "as part of nature ...is part of us" (*CP* 144). The answer to

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<sup>7</sup>That Stevens was familiar with the Stravinsky lectures on music is evidenced by one of his letters (*LWS* 446).

"Whose spirit is this?" is that the woman's song is *our* spirit circulating and participating in an Emersonian holistic universe:

And this, because the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and truly seen, its tide is one. (Emerson 399)

In contrast to Mozart who was asked to represent the spirit of "the present," the female singer in "The Idea of Order" represents spirit eternal. Why does Stevens score the spirit or soul for a female singer? She is representative not only of a procreative principle but also of a kind of Bergsonian *durée* (duration). Song, in its fluid continuity, is a more accurate metaphor for the continuity of spirit than choppy speech. Moreover, the female voice, the soprano line in choral harmony, would be, to Stevens, the representation of our highest spirit, the "descant of a self" (*CP* 191). His orchestration sounds "the actual voices of our actual spirits" (*LWS* 659). Here, significantly, he chose not to play his ideal spirit instrumentally, because instruments produce wordless music. Thus, in "The Idea of Order," words and music combined, embody the human spirit. The voice's source, like the spirit, is secret, buried in the chest, deep in the thickness of its cords, mysterious in its production. It cannot be located in the same way an instrument's presence can be spotted post-sound, betraying itself like a smoking gun. The voice's only post-production evidence is its external "mould" (*CP* 174), a human body to which we can point as source of the sound.

The person has a mould = the body has a form. All men have essentially the same form. But the spirit does not have a form. What would the form of the spirit be, if the form of the north wind is no more than that of a worm composing on a straw, to judge from the fact that, even at its deadliest, it blows with little or no sound? (*LWS* 360)

The woman's song which makes auditory order, enables the narrator and Ramon Fernandez to perceive visual order, the "lights in the fishing boats" which seem to "master...the night and portion out the sea...arranging, deepening, enchanting night." Interestingly, to Stevens, the order or arrangement *is* content, as evidenced by the double play of accents and meaning of this word in the following passage from "Sunday Morning" (*CP* 66-70, emphasis added):

She says, "I am *content* when wakened birds,  
Before they fly, test the reality  
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;  
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields  
Return no more, where, then is paradise?"

Here, his female protagonist comes to the conclusion that she is the locus and content of paradise: "divinity must live within herself" (*CP* 67). For Stevens, the poem/song as arrangement *is* content: "part of the res and not about it" (*CP* 473). His adage, "Poetry and materia poetica are interchangeable terms" (*OP* 186), explains why his choice of a singer is so important. The body, not an object external to it, is the singer's instrument. Moreover, the voice was the original instrument, all other instruments being artificially designed to imitate it or extend its reach. In "The Idea of Order," Stevens' move away from an external source of sound, an instrument, to the internal, organic voice, is an orchestration of

his idea that "god is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)" (*OP* 198). He scores the spirit and body as one, giving sense to the perplexing lines in "Peter Quince at the Clavier,"

Beauty is momentary in the mind-  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal. (*CP* 91)

"The Idea of Order"'s narrator says that "the song and water were not medleyed sound." "Medleyed" means "mingled, mixed, confused, variegated," and a musical medley is a "composition made up of ...usually incongruous passages from various other compositions" (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 1118). The narrator, Ramon Fernandez, the female singer, and the reader, are not medleyed, "incongruous" sounds, but participate harmoniously in an Emersonian universal spirit.

...that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. (Emerson 41)

The woman's walking by the sea and composing song parallels Stevens' own process of constructing poems as he walked to work each day.<sup>8</sup>

...Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang, and singing, made.

Just as an individual "stride" measures out a personal space within the abstract human capacity to walk upright, so too, the poet "masters" the public form of iambic pentameter, "portioning out" words for it and finding space within it for personal, private

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<sup>8</sup>LWS 333, 844 and Brazeau 91

expression. Moreover, his mastery of iambic pentameter, allows for a dynamic tension between public and private ideas of order and expression.

"The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order" (Frost 395-6). Though more than half (thirty-two lines out of fifty five total) of "The Idea of Order"'s lines scan as iambic pentameter, Stevens' successful renegotiation of this meter weaves the past into the present and resets and old form within a new order.

When a writer is most strongly engaged by what he is doing, as if struggling for his identity within the materials at hand, he can show us, in the mere turning of a sentence this way or that, how to keep from being smothered by the inherited structuring of things, how to keep within and yet in command of the accumulations of culture that have become a part of what he is. (Poirier *Perf. Self* xxi)

The poem's interplay between public, communal abstract pattern and private, personally inflected rhythm orchestrates our individual spirits as embodiments of nature, scored as the ebb and flow between "sea" and "she." The woman is both whole and part, container and contained, form and substance.

Stevens' representations of the sea as the continuity of life and the poem/song as an individual "new engagement with life" (OP 257) resonate with the discovery Willa Cather's developing singer makes in *The Song of the Lark*. Thea realizes that the pottery vessels Indian women made to capture the "precious" water of the flowing stream are like her own voice.

...what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining,

elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. ...In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (273)

Stevens set up this poem's order in the manner of a composer establishing the tonality of a piece of music. If all the words that contain names for musical notes are emphasized, "The Idea of Order"'s first line then establishes the key signature of C-major:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea. (emphasis added)

The three tones *b*, *g*, *c* are sufficient to establish an authentic cadence in C-major. Significantly, he may have been recalling something he read once, "a remark that Gounod made concerning Charpentier...'At last, a true musician! He composes in C-natural and no one else but the Almighty could do that'" (*LWS* 393). Thus, by creating in the key of C-major, Stevens further underscores a fresh rendition of the *Genesis* creation story. The "heave[s]" of the ocean at Key West, portrayed in lines that pull away from and then gravitate toward the iamb, intone the "sea change" of a new American poetry. The words "Key West" in the poem's title cue the performing reader to look for the tonality of a "New World" in which old modes of poetry will give way to "keener sounds." In a final gesture, the poem's last line breaks the established secure tonality of C-major by sounding its *D*.

In ghostlier demarcations...

This musical clue about hope for change is like lagan thrown into the sea so that, finding it later, one's spirit might be buoyed

up by it. Stevens incorporates subtle musical orchestration expecting that "in one ear it might strike perfectly" (*CP* 357). To discover these orchestrations of idea is to sense the practiced nuances of performance that make Stevens' work "a larger poem for a larger audience" (*CP* 465).

## VI. "Then the Theatre Changed"

The odor of earth penetrates more deeply than any word.  
(Wallace Stevens *CP* 237)

"I shall not play the flat historic scale" (*CP* 14), stated Wallace Stevens in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," cueing his audience into his transgressive mode of poetry by framing it as a musical performance. "Secular transgression" involves just this sort of "moving from one domain to another, the testing and challenging of the limits...cutting across expectations, providing unforeseen pleasures, discoveries, experiences," observes Edward Said in *Musical Elaborations* (55). Stevens appropriated musical forms and instruments to dislocate his readers from expected norms and reorient them in the modern world of fluid contingencies--"to find what will suffice" (*CP* 240). Because Stevens' choices of musical instruments and forms disrupt his audience's expectations and produce textual dissonances, it is important to examine his musical poems in light of these striking compositional framings and odd orchestrations of idea. This process of "arranging, deepening, enchanting" language (*CP* 130) alters the boundaries between poetry and music, thereby underscoring his poetic project:

...to pierce the heart's residuum  
And there to find music for a single line,  
Equal to memory, one line in which  
The vital music formulates the words. (*CP* 259)

The poem "July Mountain" (*OP* 140), demonstrates that our views of the world are conditioned by our vantage point.

We live in a constellation

Of patches and of pitches,  
 Not in a single world,  
 In things said well in music,  
 On the piano, and in speech,  
 As in a page of poetry-  
 Thinkers without final thoughts  
 In an always incipient cosmos,  
 The way, when we climb a mountain,  
 Vermont throws itself together.

Here, Stevens chooses the piano to orchestrate the idea that our understanding of the universe is a provisional construct. The word "piano" homonymically contains knowledge (know) and its negation (no), as well as *pi*, one of our mathematical formulaic tools used to obtain knowledge. Its keys fix the "pitches" we are able to play, precluding others that fall within the cracks. Stevens suggests that the words of our language are like the fixed pitches of the piano and that subtler gradations of thought may also be lost in the cracks. Thus, the cosmos is "always incipient" because it remains to be more accurately described than current language and science allow.

In "Piano Practice at the Academy of Holy Angels" (*OP* 42), Stevens portrays five little girls who are "seeking so much in their music." In part, the girls represent the hand's five fingers: Blanche, Rosa, Jocunda, Marie ("the wearer of cheap stones"--the ring finger?), and Crispine. They also represent the five lines of a musical staff. The "shining forms" of the pianos are "like the duskiest glass, reflecting the piebald of roses or what you will." Again, the pianos symbolize a method of categorizing--a looking-"glass" that "reflect[s]" with "piebald" keys, a black and white way of viewing the universe. By saying that the pianos reflect "what

you will," Stevens illustrates that the universe reflects what man chooses to see. For example, scientific musical theorists for many centuries desired to believe and "prove" that the orbits of heavenly bodies, conforming to musical ratios, made a harmonious music with one another. Stevens' poem underscores the provisionality of such constructs as mere "practice."

The young musicians will eventually find themselves "amending the airs they play." Each of the girls has a different approach to this quest. Blanche, "whose eyes are not wholly straight" implying her nonconformity to old cosmological views, will eventually find a way to alter the fixed keys of rigid language to include "lustres" other than the black and white of her piano's keys (keys to the universe). She will effect the "dreaded change of speech" necessary for a finer understanding and more accurate description of the cosmos. Rosa, on the other hand, finding the fixed musical-scientific order devoid of meaning, will end up "disdaining the empty keys." Jocunda wastes her practice time, preferring to realign the existing order rather than to discover a new one. Thus, fidgeting instead of practicing, she will "arrange the roses [on top of her piano] and rearrange" them. Superficial Marie, content not to ponder the deep music of cosmic order and meaning, initially sates herself by bejeweling her fingers. However, she eventually "will have grown still and restless." Lastly, Crispine will use her dissatisfaction with current descriptions of the universe as catalyst for seeking the subtler music of a more accurate description.

And Crispine, the blade...demanding the most from

the phrases  
 Of the well-thumbed, infinite pages of her masters,  
 who will seem old to her, requiring less and less  
 her feeling:

In another poem, Stevens orchestrates a heavily alliterated, quasi tongue-twisting interrogation of hand-me-down "ancestral theme[s]" (CP 412) for subdued, "muted" instruments. The pensive musicians seem to stumble over the validity of the inherited tales.

The mother invited humanity to her house  
 And table. The father fetches tellers of tales  
 And musicians who mute much, muse much on the  
 tales. (CP 415).

Ever the "inquisitor of structures" (CP 510) of thought embedded in our pre-packaged language, Stevens brings us to the realization that our mother-tongue shapes our very minds/thoughts.

According to William James:

We plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already; these determine what we notice; what we notice determines what we do; what we do again determines what we experience; so from one thing to another, altho [sic] the stubborn fact remains that there is a sensible flux, what is *true of it* seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation. (*Pragmatism* 598)

Stevens recognizes that the "murderous alphabet" (CP 179) can often kill the imagination.

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark  
 Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,  
 Created the time and place in which we breathed...(CP 419)

Interestingly, he scores the mother's accompaniment for the homely "accordion," which would force the mother's songs to "accord" with a black-and-white keyboard experience.

Like the mother giving her child a bit of sweet fruit with which to down a bitter medicine, Stevens coats his painful kernels of truth with the "gaiety of language" (*CP* 322). Similarly, painful reality is often encapsulated in nursery songs. For example, the flux of life is embodied in the following:

Row, row, row the boat  
Gently down the stream,  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is but a dream.<sup>1</sup>

Note that this children's nursery rhyme is usually sung in canon (round) with one voice/group entering the song after the first line, thus providing ready-made harmony. Moreover, sung in this fashion with its repeated entry of new voices, it illustrates the continuity of a William Jamesian "stream of thought"<sup>2</sup> which, like the stream of song, is unbroken. This concept is reminiscent of Emerson's description of society in "Self-Reliance":

Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them. (281)

Thus, "Row, Row, Row, the Boat" illustrates a painful truth with an optimistic twist in sweet song form: though individual people

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<sup>1</sup>T.S. Eliot's phrase ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") "til human voices wake us, and we drown" resonates deeply with the truth in this nursery song.

<sup>2</sup>William James, The Principles of Psychology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 219-278.

(voices) die, the stream of life continues. By singing this song, children participate in a microcosmic re-enactment of life's flow.

Similarly, Stevens, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," plays the reality of "things as they are" in the rhythmical form of a magical game:<sup>3</sup>

He held the world upon his nose  
And this-a-way he gave a fling.

His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi-  
And that-a-way he twirled the thing.

Sombre as fir-trees, liquid cats  
Moved in the grass without a sound.

They did not know the grass went round.  
The cats had cats and the grass turned gray

And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way:  
The grass turned green and the grass turned gray.

And the nose is eternal, that-a-way.  
Things as they were, things as they are,

Things as they will be by and by...  
A fat thumb beats out ai-yi-yi. (*CP* 178)

Here, life's painful lessons are couched in a seductive, modern nursery rhyme that tells of the life-cycle ("The cats had cats") and a spinning-spawning, Creator-less universe ("They did not know the grass went round" and "The worlds had worlds"). The universe's fecundity is scored for the strumming of a phallically "fat thumb" which "beats out" "ai-yi-yi,"<sup>4</sup> part of "Cielito Lindo's" refrain. In effect, Stevens is singing the skies. His modern

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<sup>3</sup>Incidentally, "The cats had cats" line of this poem, bears some resemblance to the lines in the nursery rhyme, "As I Was Going to St. Ives": "Each sack had seven cats,/ Each cat had seven kits."

<sup>4</sup>Stevens writes, "People think of ai-yi-yi as Spanish but it is equally Pennsylvania Dutch" (*LWS* 784).

"nursery rhyme" tells a truth about a world that is as constantly in flux as the Heraclitan river. If the "nose" (knows) is eternal, it is so as the axis of our perceptions, sensing the perpetuality of change in the universe.

To Stevens, truth is provisional. A poem is only valid as long as it serves "to help people to live their lives" (NA 29). All Biblical "truths" are equally provisional constructs, "supreme fictions" in which we "choose" to believe. He questions, "What would we be without the sexual myth" (CP 355), at once framing and undermining the Biblical myth of man's temptation by the snake and his fall from grace by reducing it to a corrupt nursery rhyme: "Jack and crimson Jill" (CP 154). Aware of the extent to which minds are influenced by Biblical stories, he also transforms the traditional Satan/snake myth into another nursery rhyme parody: "Sing a song of serpent-kin" (CP 103). The "death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination" (CP 319). By portraying this Biblical character as merely a dramatic production of the mind, he frees the poet to create more useful fictions and to replace mind-inhibiting Biblical myths with more accurate descriptive coordinates locating man's place in the universe.

In "A Thought Revolved" (CP 184), the thoughts of a "lady dying of diabetes" (itself a kind of macabre nursery rhyme opening) are like mechanical religious cant with its impassioned "dithyrambs" revolving in the grooves of a record played over the "radio." The woman is not quite ready to dissolve into a vast, imagined "Alp"-like space. She pictures it "serener just to die...accompanied" by all the "familiar things," platitudes people

normally offer "in a cheerful voice." Mocking traditional heaven and the manner in which it "collects its bleating lambs," Stevens borrows from fable, children's story, and Christmas carol. Thus, the woman thinks she will float off to death "in the floweriest barge"<sup>5</sup> like the fabled Cleopatra. Resembling a child anticipating Christmas presents, the woman awaits death full of expectations of reward. Stevens pokes fun at her thoughts by drawing upon, but altering, Clement Clarke Moore's famous opening line to a secular Christmas story:

Like the night before Christmas and all the carols.  
Dying lady, rejoice! rejoice!

Here, part of the phrase "'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house..."<sup>6</sup> precedes and corrupts the refrain from a well-known Christmas carol: "Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." By rudely juxtaposing fable, secular Christmas story, and sacred carol, Stevens equates them, implying that religious myths passed down are merely "humanized heirlooms" (Wm. James *Pragmatism* 598).

In "Of Hartford in a Purple Light" (*CP* 226), Stevens shows that the process of naming can occlude fresh vision. One phrase, in particular, bears overtones of the "Dick and Jane" series of children's grammar school readers:

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<sup>5</sup>This bears overtones of Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra on her barge in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* II.ii, 197-200):

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were lovesick with them...

<sup>6</sup>Clement Clarke Moore. "A Visit from St. Nicholas." *Best Remembered Poems*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992) 116-117.

...Look, Master,  
See the river, the railroad, the cathedral... (CP 227)

But then, "Presto!" - Stevens transforms our vision of Hartford by illuminating the unseen in an ultraviolet ("purple") light.

Hi! Whisk it, poodle, flick the spray  
Of the ocean, ever-freshening,  
Of the irised hunks, the stone bouquet. (CP 227)

Stevens' metaphor ("the spray of the ocean ever freshening") condenses an object, the river, into the process from which it originates, the evaporation of the ocean into fresh rainwater. Solid objects, such as railroad cars seen "in a purple light," appear as "irised hunks." Like a dog fetching its master's slippers, the protagonist, mastered by language, ticks off the pre-established names for objects. Flicking off old descriptions as a poodle shakes off water, Stevens shows that a cathedral, for example, could very well be seen as a "stone bouquet."

Elsewhere, Stevens renovates language in the troubadour's name "Redwood Roamer" (CP 286), combining both the old and new. Here, he borrows from a children's jump-rope rhythm, "Red Rover, Red Rover, I invite [child's name] over," a game in which a child already jumping rope (turned by two other children) invites another child to skip in sync behind him/her in "Double-Dutch" fashion. Stevens recasts "Red Rover" as "Redwood Roamer," conjuring up the old and uniquely American Redwood trees. By orchestrating Redwood Roamer's tale in the strictly defined "sonata" form, he shows how composing/performing within a pre-existing structure can color what is produced, just as language can influence the mind's rhythms. Language, then, "is a kind of blank

in which one sees" (*CP* 287). Stevens concludes, "There is no life except in the word of it"(*CP* 287).

...We must prepare to hear the Roamer's  
Story...The sound of that slick sonata,  
  
Finding its way from the house, makes music seem  
To be a nature, a place in which itself  
  
Is that which produces everything else, in which  
The Roamer is a voice taller than the redwoods,  
  
Engaged in the most prolific narrative  
A sound producing the things that are spoken. (*CP*  
286-287)

Stevens' analogy in the poem becomes clear. The poet, in attempting to jump out of the bounds of pre-established language, metaphorically risks entanglement in the turning rope that sets the rhythm to which he is expected to jump: "the words of things entangle and confuse" (*CP* 41).

At one point, Stevens describes his poetic project as "To find of light a music issuing" (*CP* 398). "Martial Cadenza" (*CP* 237) seems a description of what this phenomenon would be like. In this poem, the evening star issues forth a synaesthetic blend of light and sound.

Only this evening I saw again low in the sky  
The evening star, at the beginning of winter...  
That in spring will crown every western horizon,  
Again...as if it came back, as if life came back,  
Not in a later son, a different daughter, another place,  
But as if evening found us young, still young,  
Still walking in a present of our own.

The word "low" in the first line, conveys both the visual location of the star and a possible auditory equivalent for the sound which the

star is imagined to make (the long, sustained sound of a domesticated bovine animal), suitable for this mournful cadenza. As "a flourish of indefinite form given to a solo voice or instrument at the close of a movement, or between two divisions of a movement" (*OED* II.760), this "martial cadenza" could be imagined to be that of a fallen soldier momentarily resuscitated, appropriate since "cadenza's" root "cadere" means "to fall."<sup>7</sup>

The word "own" is emphasized throughout the first stanza, both on its own, and contained within other words such as "crown" and "only." Moreover, "own[is]" reiteration underscores this cadenza as the performer's own improvisation/life contrasted with that of his progeny ("cadency"), reinforced in the line: "Not in a later son, a different daughter, another place."

The star, like the light (light years) with which modern science measures distance, sets up a time that is all its own.

It was like sudden time in a world without time,  
This world, this place, the street in which I was,  
Without time: as that which is not has no time,

"Sudden time" in a world without (or outside of) time is the space in which a cadenza flourishes. In this "cadenza," Stevens plays with time like a masterful soloist. The first stanza is dominated by the past. The two central stanzas (II and III) contain equal parts of past and present as the "present" becomes "realized" and "time flash[es] again."

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<sup>7</sup>In fact, a famous cadenza by Beethoven in one of the movements of his fourth piano concerto bears the humorous heading, "Cadenza (ma senza cadere)."

Stevens' "cadenza" makes a statement about mutable matter, energy, and time, for within the third stanza, the "star" metamorphoses to "it," "life," and to "time," itself.

What had this star to do with the world **it lit,**  
 With the blank skies over England, over France  
 And above the German camps? **It** looked apart.  
 Yet **it** is this that shall maintain—**Itself**  
 Is time, apart from any past, apart  
 From any future, the ever-living and being,  
 The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire,  
 [emphasis added]

This stanza, with the most "present" feeling of the poem, is pervaded by the "moving" force of all its gerunds: "ever-living," "being," "ever-breathing," "moving." "The present realized" dwells momentarily in virtual reality. It "flashes" like the frames of a movie, discontinuous stills so sped up that the unrealized gaps between them are imperceptible. Here, a living, breathing human being, as an embodiment of the timeless life-force, is depicted as an actualized performance, the "realization of a figured bass: "not the symbol [as in chord symbol] but that which for the symbol stands."

The present close, the present realized,  
 Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands,  
 The vivid thing in the air that never changes,  
 Though the air change.

However, the epiphanic moment having expired, the last four lines return again to the past tense.

Only this evening I saw it again,  
 At the beginning of the winter, and I walked and  
 talked  
 Again, and lived and was again, and breathed again  
 And moved again and flashed again, time flashed  
 again.

Of another Stevens poem, the enigmatically entitled "The Bagatelles the Madrigals" (CP 213), Barbara Holmes observes that its "curious title" conjoins "two dramatically distinct musical forms" by juxtaposing them "in the title unpunctuated" (50). Clearly, deciphering the musical references in the title would provide a key to understanding the poem, but Holmes gives it short shrift in her discussion of "the decomposer's art."

A *bagatelle* is "a trifle, a short piece of music in a light vein;" its "title implies no specific form" (*Groves* Vol.2.16) but is usually composed for the piano.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, a *madrigal* is "strictly an unaccompanied chorus in from 2 to 8 parts [voices], based on a *cantus firmus*, and written with elaborate counterpoint" (*Music Lover's Encyclopedia* 633). Stevens disrupts expectations by first giving a musical title, and then producing a text about a snake. The disjunction between title and poem is much like the "crevice" in which the snake, like the mind, wriggles. Tracing the poem's many questions enables us to posit the *cantus firmus* precursor "melody" of this poem. The poem seeks to pinpoint the locus of thinking, first that of the snake, and later that of "people," and the "mind,"<sup>9</sup> itself.

One begins to suspect that "music" is buried within the poem just as the hand's five fingers needed to play the piano "bagatelle" are pent within the "serpent." The poem counterpoints the

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<sup>8</sup>Interestingly, "bagatelles have almost invariably been written for piano solo, but the four in Dvorak's Op. 47 are charmingly scored for two violins, cello and *harmonium*" (*Groves* Vol.2.16 emphasis added). According to Joan Richardson, Stevens knew and liked the music of Dvorak.

<sup>9</sup>Barbara Holmes is correct in deducing that the "snake" metamorphoses into "a human mind" (50).

"cantus firmus" (ground song) of another animal poem, William Blake's "The Tyger" from Songs of Experience. By framing his snake poem as a musical form, Stevens provides an allusion to the earlier Blake "song." Like its precursor, the poem contains six four-line stanzas consisting of questions addressed to an animal.

Where do you think, serpent,  
Where do you lie, beneath snow,  
And with eyes closed  
Breathe in a crevice of earth?

In what camera do you taste  
Poison, in what darkness set  
Glittering scales and point  
The tipping tongue?

And where is it, you, people,  
Where is it that you think, baffled  
By the trash of life,  
Through winter's meditative light?

In what crevice do you find  
Forehead's cold,...

Clearly, this poem resonates in form with the earlier one, but in substance excludes the Blakean "immortal hand or eye" as the creator of the universe, preferring "the mind that forms itself." Stevens' poem implies the question, "Of all the possible "songs" the mind could produce, why, in the modern world, does it persist in the reductive binary thinking that maintains a mythology of good and evil? He suggests that the serpent, as metaphor for the unseen workings of the mind in its "crevice," could shed "vengeful" thoughts, casting off the residue of its old mythological valence as corrupt force.

The "elles" and "gals" embedded in the names of the poem's two musical forms ("bagatelles" and "madrigals") seem tempted by the [sir]pent in the first line. So, too, the reader is tempted to attach some import not only to the title's yoking of two mutually exclusive musical forms, but also to its seeming disjunction with the poem's content, an apostrophe to a serpent. The reader must be prepared to accept the possibility of arbitrariness on the part of Stevens, who may be using the odd musical title to underscore the notion of a random universe.

Instead of Songs of Experience or Innocence, Stevens creates "songs of that dominance," those that crawl to the surface of consciousness as "thoughts" spoken by "the tipping tongue." By finishing this "song" on "that dominance," he ends the poem on an inconclusive dominant chord. Moreover, by placing the last stanza within a parenthesis, he draws attention to the "bagatelle," trifle that it is. The parenthesis surrounding the last stanza acts as the orthographic equivalent to the "crevice" or location in which thinking takes place. Functioning as an acoustical "baffle," the parenthesis attempts to capture that which is uncapturably parenthetical, the movements and sounds of thought.

(This is one of the thoughts  
Of the mind that forms itself  
Out of all the minds,  
One of the songs of that dominance.)

In Stevens' "Tattoo," the play of meaning between the poem's title and its body is much like the flickering of light itself. Here, he implies that the "tattoo" is the atavistic imprint of our intuitive, irrational fear of spiders.

The light is like a spider.  
 It crawls over the water.  
 It crawls over the edges of the snow.  
 It crawls under your eyelids  
 And spreads its webs there--  
 Its two webs.

In an extended metaphor, light is compared to a spider because it "crawls" and it "spreads webs." In the second stanza, the light becomes interiorized corporeally.

The webs of your eyes  
 Are fastened  
 To the flesh and bones of you  
 As to rafters or grass.

By the third stanza, a reversal of the metaphor occurs wherein "your eyes" now send filaments out into the world as questing beams. Note that here, as elsewhere (in "The Snow Man"), Stevens uses "snow," a word homonymically containing "know."

There are filaments of your eyes  
 On the surface of the water  
 And in the edges of the snow.

Each question about the nature of this poem merely "mark[s] the edge of one of many circles" (CP 94). What are the two webs of light? Could they be our two eyes over which light crawls; or two states of observable nature, solid (snow) and liquid (water); or perhaps the two postulated forms of ever-enigmatic light, appearing to scientists as both wave and particle? What we can know about the outside world is reflexively colored by our modes of perception. Thus, the tattoo's "light" spreads webs under eyelids, and the eyes in turn spread filaments over nature.

Is this poem, published in Stevens' *Harmonium* volume in 1923, a response to Robert Frost's poem "Design," published in

*American Poetry 1922, A Miscellany?* Both poems bear titles that flicker enigmatically between the verbal imperative and simple noun. Both poets, familiar with the concepts expressed in William James' *Pragmatism*, utilize the idea of the spider web's design (tattoo) to ponder the larger issue of design in the universe.

God's existence has from time immemorial been held to be proved by certain natural facts. Many facts appear as if expressly designed in view of one another. ...The parts of our eye fit the laws of light to perfection, leading its rays to a sharp picture on our retina. Such mutual fitting of things diverse in origin argued design, it was held; and the designer was always treated as a man-loving deity. (*Pragmatism* 534)

James argues that in order to prove that design existed, our ancestors "ransacked" Nature for examples of design contained in the mutual suitability of separate entities. He points out that this ultimately proved futile, since Darwin showed "the power of chance happenings,... the enormous waste of nature in producing results that get destroyed because of unfitness, ...[and] the number of adaptations which, if designed would argue for an evil rather than a good designer,...depend[ing] on the point of view": "To the grub under the bark the exquisite fitness of the woodpecker's organism to extract him would certainly argue a diabolical designer" (*Pragmatism* 535).

As though responding to both Frost's "Design" and James' thoughts in *Pragmatism*, Stevens, in his poem, weaves the search for universal design into the very fabric of our vision. He is quick to point out that if the light "crawls over" the "surface" of the knowable world, our eyes, in turn, reciprocate.

In spinning out the extended metaphor in "Tattoo," Stevens shows that any design in the universe is one that we have inscribed. The poem continues to resonate with James, who states that "we break the flux of sensible reality" by creating a kind of grammar ("subjects" of "Prepositions" and "predicates" of "relation") that "is wholly dictated by human considerations, intellectual consistency being one of them" (*Pragmatism* 598). As Stevens would put it, "The arrangement contains the desire of the artist" (*CP* 296). James, Frost, and Stevens all underscore the strong connection between "design" and the desire of humans for a sense of order in the universe. Literally caught in a web of our own design, we view the world in light of the words we have spun out in order to understand it.

Stevens' spider-light['s] "filaments" radiate outward from the corporeal, sensual, perceiving "flesh and bones" self, seeking knowledge from what James terms "the study of Nature's particulars" (*Pragmatism* 536). Thus, while Frost's poem emphasizes only visual design, Stevens, by framing his poem as a "tattoo," plays with the acoustical as well as the visual. Musically, a "tattoo" is also a drum or bugle call summoning soldiers to retire for the night, in this case intoned cleverly by the almost winding-down quality of the poem's anaphoric reiterations ("it crawls") and its last stanza's decrease in metric energy. The first stanza ranges from two to four stresses per line, three being the dominant number; the second ranges from one to three stresses per line, two being dominant; and in the last stanza only two major stresses are contained in each line.

The title suggests a disturbing question: Lacking the traditional idea of heaven, to what final home (tent/barracks) does the soldier retire? The title also implies that we are always-already inscribed with the desire for universal design. The question of design in the universe points to a dilemma: If the universe is random rather than designed, then, is there no designer and no immortality?

Ultimately, James says that "the old question of *whether* there is design is idle":

...the mere word "design" by itself has, we see, no consequences and explains nothing. It is the barrenest of principles. ...What sort of a design? and what sort of a designer? are the only serious questions, and the study of facts is the only way of getting even approximate answers. ...The real question is *what* is the world, whether or not it have a designer--and that can be revealed only by the study of all nature's particulars. (*Pragmatism* 535-536)

Stevens contended that "to read a poem should be an experience, like experiencing an act" (*OP* 191). His poems encourage a fresh experience "of nature's particulars." Refusing to be "tattooed" or "marked in a permanent way" (*OED* XVII.667) by outmoded systems of thought, frees us. "Tattoo" signals that we are to stretch our imaginations, performing a number of transubstantiations from sight to sound and back again. Stevens' synaesthetic blending of the two senses of tattoo, both visual and auditory, shows how we capture meaning (of a poem or about the universe) like a spider catches prey in its web. Meaning is telegraphed by contextual vibrations of the web of language.

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind...(H. James 52)

In "Asides on the Oboe" (*CP* 250), Stevens grapples again with the crucial question of belief:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,  
Of final belief. So, say that final belief  
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

He frames the question of locating belief as theatrical "asides," words spoken out of earshot of the on-stage characters. These "asides" make the parenthetical primary, highlighted through isolation.

If the poet of "Asides" is conceived as an actor, then the oboe becomes his chosen mask. According to anthropologist Victor Turner, the mask paradoxically reveals part of the identity of the wearer even as it conceals.<sup>10</sup>

...if one is going to wear a costume or fantasia, it must communicate one's most private or intimate fantasy in the most artistic way possible. Repression must be lifted. One might even talk about the aestheticization of the repressed, making the very private very public in the mode of beauty. ...the reverse of fiction or fake: it demands validity of feeling, sad or glad. (*Anth. of Perf.* 137)

"Thus one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous" (Stevens, *CP*, 145), or, as Emerson writes in "Worship," "Society is a masked ball, where every one hides his real character, and reveals it by hiding" (1067).

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<sup>10</sup>Turner writes specifically about Brazilian Carnival masks, but his theory could be applied to masks in general.

"Asides" plays with the "doubleness" of the oboe as a double-reed instrument and as the "two kinds of oboe or hautboy: the one of the sixteenth century used for fanfares to introduce the king after the prologues are over; and the one we know as ours, popular from the eighteenth century on, a plaintive, solitary, delicate, questioning instrument" (Brown 76). The old word *hautbois*, derived from the French words *haut* and *bois* meaning "high" and "woods," contrasts with the modern word *oboe*, which "has no meaning as the French name has" (*OED* X.654). Buried within the word "o b o e s o l e t e," even the name of the instrument on which the poem is being played has lost its former nobility and meaning, thus paralleling the destiny of the "obsolete fiction[s]" of dead Gods and time-"granulated" heroes.

That obsolete fiction of the wide river in  
An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed;  
And the metal heroes that time granulates-

For Stevens, Nietzsche's announcement of the death of the old Christian God left modern man bereft: "Poet and painter alike live and work in the midst of a generation that is experiencing essential poverty in spite of fortune" (*NA* 171). Stevens felt that the modern poet's project was clear: "...the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (*NA* 142).

The notion of "central man," the core of essential humanness, grows out of this new mythology of the earth. Stevens interiorizes God: "God is in me or else is not at all" (*OP* 198). "Asides" reactionary interlocutor ("If you say...") registers his

objection to this new world view, and Stevens' protagonist counters with the notion of the thinking hero.

If you say on the hautboy man is not enough,  
Can never stand as a God, is ever wrong  
In the end, however naked, tall, there is still  
The impossible possible philosopher's man,  
The man who has had the time to think enough,

That this "philosopher's man" still "walks in dew" shows that he is fresh like the dew while also bearing traces of old forms, since the dew on his poetic feet is the vestige of where he has been.

Stevens' depiction of "central man" proceeds to take on overtones of the traditional description of God as a "circle whose center is nowhere and whose circumference is everywhere." However, through the alchemy of solid geometry, this god-circle metamorphoses in this poem to a sphere, a "human globe."

The central man, the human globe, responsive  
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,  
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

John Donne claimed that new scientific discoveries had cast traditional belief in doubt:

The new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.  
And freely men confess that this world's spent,  
When in the planets, and the firmament  
They seek so many new...("An Anatomy of the World")<sup>11</sup>

For Stevens, the new science does not cast everything "in doubt." Instead, his concept of a spherical spiritual summation invokes post-Einsteinian physics as explicated by Whitehead and quoted by

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<sup>11</sup>Donne, John. The Complete English Poems, ed. A.J. Smith (New York: Penguin Books) 1987) 276.

Stevens in *The Necessary Angel*: "Everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location" (115-116).

Fracturing words into meaningful components, Stevens, in "Asides," underscores the death of old mythologies by creating, what I term, a "breakdown pun"<sup>12</sup> when the word "diamonds" becomes "die" + "a" + "monde" (French for "world"). Through this device, he creates a microcosmic picture of the axis of his poem, summing up its theme through the nuclear fission of one word. In "Asides," "die-a-monde," the death of a world, is the nucleus of the poem's general meaning, fissioning the old world view in order to produce the spiritual energy for new beliefs appropriate to current reality.

In Stevens' modern mythology, "central man" is:

...the transparence of the place in which  
He is and in his poems we find peace,

Again, he creates a breakdown pun through the word "transparence" equaling "trans" + "parents," homonymically emphasizing that the poet-hero's vision moves from past to present, siring our own world view. That this protagonist reflects the reality of the masses is apparent in the "mirror" and "glass" imagery with which he is described. He embodies both

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<sup>12</sup>Though the terminology ("breakdown pun") is mine, I am grateful to Joan Richardson for pointing out ["oranges" = "or" + "anges" French for "angels"] in Stevens' "Sunday Morning," another poem about the issue of belief. Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, calls this kind of pun, a "dividing-up joke" because "one and the same word" is cut up into components "used in two ways" (33). I feel that Stevens intends us to perform this dividing up of a word "into its separate syllables, which, when they are this separated, give another sense" (33-34).

individuality and universality, expressing ["exponent by a form of speech" (*CP* 397)] our many facets exponentially: "Who in a million diamonds sums us up." Thus, the poet performs both symphonically and soloistically, just as he does in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," playing: "A million people on one string."

In "Asides," Stevens strives to offer consolation, make peace, and produce a way of thinking that might, in the future, prevent the grim reality of war.

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent  
And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrdoms.  
How was it then with the central man? Did we  
Find peace? We found the sum of men. We found,  
If we found the central evil, the central good.  
We buried the fallen without jasmine crowns.  
There was nothing he did not suffer, no; nor we.

Phrases like "sums us up," "the sum of men," and "the glass man, cold and numbered" underscore not only "central man's" function in reviewing, clarifying, and recapitulating our spiritual worth, but also wartime's sad reduction of the value of human life to a mere body count. This grim "summing up" is contrasted with the fecundity of "summer":

He sets the peddler's pie and cries in summer,  
The glass man, cold and numbered, dewily cries,  
Thou art not August unless I make thee so.

Interestingly, "Peddler's pie," blends "peddler's French" (unintelligible jargon spoken by rogues and thieves among themselves) with "pie" (a confused jumble of letters resulting from the breaking down of type form). Certainly, the ideas of Darwin, Einstein, Freud, and Nietzsche must have made chaos of early twentieth-century man's view of his position in the universe. The

poet's role is ever more urgent for, in the midst of this chaos, he must find order. By arranging letters and words, the poet creates a setting for the inarticulate (Peddler's French) and the unreadable (pie). In so doing, he plugs man into the God-circle, since *pi* is the essential, unchangeable part of the equation rendering a circle's dimensions, thus truly making "central man" the "central good."

Stevens stresses the poet's role in a letter:

...I do seek a centre and expect to go on seeking it. I don't say that I shall not find it or that I do not expect to find it. It is the greatest necessity even without specific identification. (*LWS* 584)

He emphasizes that the poet's fictions actualize man's spiritual needs:

...if we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea, and that our notions of heaven and hell are merely poetry...if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in Heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed, whether young or old, whether in rags or ceremonial robe, a man who needed what he had created, uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation. (*NA* 51)

In "Asides," the poet's value is summed up as the universal currency of diamonds. Moreover, his function as a medium of vision is highlighted as "glass." For Stevens, the poet exists in both (1) the fragile present, represented by "glass," his mortality, and in (2) the timeless future, represented by the durable "diamond," to portray his immortality through art. "Dew," "glass," "transparence," and "diamond," all words used to describe the poet as an eternal medium through which we "see" the world, contrast with "metal," the one image given for the traditional "hero" that

time "granulates." Granulation suggests fragmentation and disintegration of the old world view in contrast with the poet's vision of the essential unity and harmony of the universe.

Stevens arrives at this gestalt of the universe's oneness after grappling with the difficult "choice" between beliefs implied by "Asides'" statement that "it is time to choose." Thus, this wartime poem achieves a kind of peace through the unity expressed in its closing section.

It was not as if the jasmine ever returned.  
 But we and the diamond globe at last were one.  
 We had always been partly one. It was as we came  
 To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard  
 Him chanting for those buried in their blood,  
 In the jasmine haunted forests...

Though the "jasmine" never returns, the forests are yet "haunted" by the spirit of its scent even as they are haunted by traces of the obsolete meaning of "hautbois" ("high woods").

The poet, as language-maker, creates words for the differences in what we perceive (loud/soft; fast/slow; high/low; and the like). By devising names for finer nuances ("imagined steps"), he can help us to observe what was previously unseen.

Clandestine steps upon imagined stairs  
 Climb through the night because his cuckoos call.

Stevens shows visionary capacity to be the poet's special alchemy. Like a magic looking-"glass," the poet reflects human potential for nobility: "Thou art not August unless I make thee so." His poet is a kind of meta-hero, self-sufficient because he contains "the whole of harmonium" and is "the glass man without external reference."

Returning to the concept of "Asides on the Oboe" as a self-enclosed theatrical-musical performance, the poem, itself, is "without external reference." Thinking again of the "oboe" as a mask for personality provides a clue for the analysis of Stevens' significant orchestration. Anthropologist Turner says that masks are tools of self-performance:

...man is a self-performing animal--his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This can be in two ways: the actor may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings. (*Anthropology of Performance* 81)

Stevens' choice of the "oboe" reveals us to ourselves. The word suggests the God-circle by its palindromesque beginning and ending on the "o" sound. The poem's orchestration for the oboe resonates with Baudelaire's "Correspondances" which "sang ecstatically of a oneness with the world based on universal analogy" (Benamou xiii), comparing the sweet softness of a child's young skin to the sound of an oboe. Stevens' embedding of the theatrical conventions of the "prologue" and the "aside" points toward references to the "oboe" and "hautbois" in Shakespeare, whose works often inform Stevens' poems. An allusion to the "oboe" (hautbois) occurs in *Henry IV, Part II*. Falstaff talks of the slender Justice Shallow in terms that describe the latter's emaciated state: "you might have thrust him and his apparel into an eelskin; the case of a treble hautboy was a mansion for him" (III.ii). Moreover, in this scene, Falstaff expatiates on "how to

choose a man" for military conscription, claiming that a thin, spirited man makes the best soldier because he is less of a target for the enemy: "O give me the spare man, and spare me the great ones" (III.ii).

Similarly, "Asides" is about choosing ("it is time to choose") between the aggressive hero and the new thinking man ("the man who has had the time to think enough") who will avoid war. Further, this poet-hero ("glass man") must envision a replacement for what modern man has lost through the "death of God."

As scepticism becomes both complete and profound, we face either a true civilization or a blank; and literature ought to be one of the factors to determine the choice. Certainly, if civilization is to consist only of man himself, and it is, the arts must take the place of divinity...(LWS 564)

The message "Divinity must live within herself" (CP 67) is manifest in Stevens' metahero, "the glass man without external reference." Why, after all, does Stevens choose to play the theme of belief on the oboe? When the musicians of an American symphony orchestra warm up onstage prior to a concert, each one "noodles" away on his own. Order is suddenly rendered out of this chaos by the sounding of the ultimate tuning meta-reference--the oboe's "A." Acoustically, Stevens orchestrates his vision of the metahero through this meta-reference.

Stevens' poems show that language contributes the building blocks of belief structures, effectively constituting an architecture of mind and framing ensuing thought. In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens illustrates two frames of thinking by constructing two alternative cathedrals and providing two

contrastive orchestrations. First, he sets up a physical projection of the old Christian woman's mind:

Take the moral law and make a nave of it  
 And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,  
 The conscience is converted into palms,  
 Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.

The heavy alliterations ("haunted heaven," "conscience ...converted," "hankering...hymns") suggest the style of Old English religious poetry.

The knave-like protagonist proposes building an alternative cathedral, an extrapolation of physical pleasure "indulged":

Take the opposing law and make a peristyle.  
 And from the peristyle project a masque  
 Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,  
 Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,  
 Is equally converted into palms,  
 Squiggling like saxophones.

Through a series of conversions, both the "moral law" and the "opposing law" of "bawdiness" have been "equally converted into palms." In the absence of traditional religious belief in God and an afterlife, the end for the righteous and the hedonistic alike is the same - "from ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Both are converted into soil in which to grow palms.

And palm for palm,  
 Madame, we are where we began.

"Palms," for the Christian woman, would be those with which Christ was welcomed into Jerusalem as the King of the Jews. Stevens' use of them here resonates with the stichomythic passage from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a sonnet between the two lovers in which their palms meeting are compared to a pilgrim's

prayer (I.V.95-109).<sup>13</sup> Romeo, pressing for an indulgence in physicality, concurs with Stevens who would assert that "not to live a physical world" is "the greatest poverty" (*CP* 325). Thus, if the old woman is bound by a heaven that is empty and haunted, the protagonist's projection is boundless:

Allow,  
 Therefore, that in the planetary scene  
 Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,  
 Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,  
 Proud of such novelties of the sublime,  
 Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,  
 May merely may, madame, whip from themselves  
 A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.

Stevens effects a bit of contrastive orchestration. With a suggestion of thwarted sexuality, the old woman's "palms" are compared to "windy citherns hankering for hymns." The "palms" that emanate from the "opposing law" are scored for "squiggling saxophones." Traditional ascetic Christianity is portrayed as the cithern, an ancient instrument with a long Biblical history.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, modern skepticism is scored appropriately for a modern

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<sup>13</sup>*Romeo*. If I profane with my unworhiest hand  
 This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:  
 My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
 To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.  
*Juliet*. Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
 Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
 For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
 And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.  
*Romeo*. Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?  
*Juliet*. Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.  
*Romeo*. O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!  
 They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.  
*Juliet*. Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.  
*Romeo*. Then move not while my prayer's effect take.  
 Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged.

<sup>14</sup>Forms of the cithern date from Greek and Roman antiquity, and it is depicted in the *Utrecht Psalter* (9th- or 10th- century).

instrument, the saxophone, invented by Adolphe Sax around 1840. What does Stevens imply through this orchestration? Aptly choosing the cithern, many of which had long necks and grotesquely-carved heads, he suggests the physiognomy of the high-toned old woman who is beyond sexuality. He sets the timbre of her thin hymn-singing voice (already implied by the poem's title) against the bawdy, sensual sounds of jazz, suggested by the "squiggle" of the saxophone with its upwardly curving bell. Moreover, this instrument's name embeds a possible "ghost" word "sex." "Projecting a masque" (mask), each instrument depicts its fundamental "law," either of "conscience" or of "bawdiness." Concealed under bawdy bravado, the old woman's interlocutor performs a "masque" (entertainment) that thinly disguises cosmic insecurity.

Other subtler transformations serve to equalize the two cathedrals. If the old woman's "moral law" makes "a nave" (the Latin *navis* = *ship*) then this very law, oddly enough, "projects the masque" ("mask" = "rudder"<sup>15</sup>) of the "opposing law." Further, her "nave" engenders the "knave" interlocutor who challenges her views.<sup>16</sup>

The poem's "jovial hullabaloo" resonates with the hundredth Psalm's "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." There is a masturbatory quality to the "disaffected flagellants...whip[ing] from themselves/ A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres."

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<sup>15</sup>OED. Vol.IX. 424

<sup>16</sup>Because of Stevens' emphasis on the "sound of words," it is important to delve into homonyms and the significant texture and meaning they contribute toward his poems.

Continuing along the nave/ship line of association (a game, I am convinced, Stevens means us to play) the Christian woman's ascetic morality gives rise to its raucous, sensual opposite--the hullabaloo (emphasis added). Underscoring a clamorous, fecund universe, letters in the poem also appear to quickly replicate their "latent doubles[s]" (*CP* 387) in such words as "muzzy," "hullabaloo," "squiggling," "disaffected," "allow," "well-stuffed," and the like. Paralleling the way in which the old woman's asceticism gives birth to its hedonistic opposite, the poem moves from inside to outside--from "nave" to "peristyle," and visually, the eleven *i*'s of its last two lines form the pillars of this derisive peristyle:

This will make widows wince. But fictive things  
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" conjures up images of Stevens' mother:

...my mother is dying. ...All the feelings that are aroused create a constant desire or hope of something after death. ..Fortunately for mother she has faith and she approaches her end here (unless her mind is too obscured) with the just expectation of re-union afterwards; and if there be a God, such as she believes in, the justness of her expectation will not be denied. ...She always maintained an active interest in the bible, and found there the solace she desired--She was, of course, disappointed, as we all are. (*LWS* 173)

He recalls her Bible reading and hymn singing: "her studious touch at the piano...and her absorbed, detached way of singing" (*LWS* 173). Such absorption in hymn singing constrains one within four squareness (4/4 time, four part harmony, four line stanzas) to the point of being "detached" from the real world, "an old chaos of the sun" (*CP* 70). Like the rigid structure of the typical New England

hymn, the constraints of language can prevent us from observing the rhapsodic reality of the universe and enjoying a new, expanded architecture of mind.

The lean cats of the arches of the churches,  
That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.  
(CP 254)

Stevens would replace the rigid, "lean cats of the arches of the churches" with "liquid cats," a metaphor representing the concept of a fluid, pluralistic universe.

The protagonist, in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," starts from abstract assertion ("Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame") and ends with a playful tongue twister:

"But fictive things  
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

Thus, the poem begins with a cerebral abstraction, difficult to understand, and ends with a physical tongue-twister, difficult to articulate. By plunging us back into the tongue-twister's humorous physicality, Stevens shows us that the physical world, and our bodies as part of it, are the reality from which belief should spring: "Reality is the footing from which we leap after what we do not have and on which everything depends" (LWS 600). He admonishes the "high-toned, old Christian woman" that her architecture of mind limits her ability to worship the real universe:

The earth is not a building but a body." (OP 186)

## VII. "Like a Page of Music"

Where shall I find  
Bravura adequate to this great hymn?  
(Wallace Stevens *CP* 16)

Wallace Stevens' "'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' is a poem that rewrites 'supreme' writing, that is, our sacred scriptures; or points toward ways of rewriting them," contends Eleanor Cook (*Word-Play* 215). Yet in failing to recognize the "musical joke" underlying "Notes," Cook also misses the poem's textual basis. Stevens claimed that "Notes" was an attempt "to follow a scheme" and that originally "the first poem bore the caption REFACIMENTO" [sic] (*LWS* 431), which means a "new-modelling or recasting" of an old work (*OED* XIII.912). Structurally, Stevens' "*rifacimento*" incorporates two musical methods of organization. On a macro-architectural level, the poem is organized as a Byzantine *kanon*, an ancient ecclesiastical form of vocal music existing as a "hymnodic complex comprising nine odes that were originally attached to the nine 'biblical canticles' and related to these by means of corresponding poetic allusion or textual quotation" (Randel 117). Within this structure, on a micro-architectural level, Stevens employs *canon* as the "fecund principle" (I.x.4) which generates animals and men for its fables through the atom-like sounds of word-parts. The poem oscillates between "Notes" as text and "Notes" as music, making it consistent with the early history of the Byzantine *kanon* during which the poet was also a musical composer. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" can be interpreted as a playful variation of the Byzantine

kanon,<sup>1</sup> freely approximating its form so as not to "lose all of the qualities [Stevens] wanted to get into the thing" (*LWS* 431).

To overlook the poem's musical joke is also to miss its fundamental humor--Stevens reduces sacred scripture to "notes" for his own kanon. Consequently, Cook fails to recognize the correlations between the various sections of "Notes" and the Biblical canticles which they mirror with intentional "distortion" ("Notes" III.x.13). Stevens modernizes the kanon form by adding a tenth ode while evasively alluding to the required nine canticles and their corresponding Biblical passages:

- I. Song of Moses: *Exodus* 15. 1-19
- II. Song of Moses: *Deuteronomy* 32. 1-43
- III. Prayer of Hannah: 1 *Samuel* 2. 1-10
- IV. Prayer of Habbakuk: *Habbakuk* 3. 1-19
- V. Prayer of Isaiah: *Isaiah* 26. 9-20
- VI. Prayer of Jonah: *Jonah* 2. 3-10
- VII. Prayer of Azaria & First Song of the Three Children: *Apocrypha: Daniel* 3. 26-45, & 52-56
- VIII. Second Song of the Three Children: *Apocrypha: Daniel* 3: 57-88
- IX. Magnificat and Benedictus: *Luke* 1: 46-55, & 68-79

Moreover, he utilizes two principles "that pervade the history of sacred poetry: the paraphrase or variation of Sacred Writ, and the principle of free poetic intercalation between the scriptural passages" (Werner 227-28).

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<sup>1</sup>In a letter to Henry Church (to whom "Notes is dedicated) dated July 19, 1945, Stevens writes not only of the "benumbing effect of the war" but also of a Cambridge visit where he met a scholar whom he describes as being "interested in everything Byzantine":

...and he seems to ransack life for Byzantine mementoes [sic]. Apparently, when he was younger, he was absorbed in music, and had something to do with the Department of Music at Harvard. (*LWS* 508).

It is interesting to imagine the kind of discussion about Byzantine kanon that Stevens and this scholar might have had.

Approximating Byzantine kanon style, Stevens sets up an initial "model stanza" known as the *hirmos*, which is used as the format for succeeding stanzas (*New Oxford Hist. of Music* II.39, and Werner 471). Thus, the poem is composed of Cantos of twenty-one lines, each consisting of seven sets of triadic stanzas. As a celebratory hymn, it mimics the seven days of creation and the notion of the Holy Trinity.

During actual church services, the kanon was not performed continuously but was divided into three parts. This pattern is reflected in the three main sections of "Notes": I."It Must Be Abstract," II."It Must Change," and III."It Must Give Pleasure." To these, Stevens adds a dedication to his friend Henry Church, and a final short section ("Soldier, there is a war between the mind"). This latter corresponds to the *expostellarion* traditionally chanted at the end of the kanon.

Even while working through one of his favorite themes, "the unavailability of Christian faith to clear-sighted modern minds" (Halliday 36), Stevens constantly draws upon some fundamental texts of that very Christian faith for "Notes." It is as though he is uneasy about declaring: "We have not the need of any seducing hymn" (II.viii.3). His alterations, erasures, and rewritings of the required canticles for the kanon nearly obliterate their original foundation yet bear traces of it.

These traces or "vestigial states of mind" (II.ii.19) appear like the mirage foundations or reservoirs ("tanks") in "Notes" desert:

The glitter goes on surfaces of tanks,  
Shattering velvetest far-away. (I.v.8)

Bits of each of the required canticles can be found buried like the remnants of an ancient foundation throughout the poem. For example, Stevens secularizes "The Lord is a man of war"<sup>2</sup> from the traditional kanon's first canticle,<sup>3</sup> transposing it to "Soldier, there is a war between the mind" ("Notes," Coda, line 1). Moreover, Moses' role in *Exodus* 15.119, wherein the prophet thanks God for drowning his enemies in the Red Sea, is reversed when MacCoulough (who, like Moses, is the leader of a clan)<sup>4</sup> himself becomes "drowned in its [the sea's] washes" (I.viii.13). Here as elsewhere in "Notes," the original Biblical canticle suffers a sea-change. In the same manner, the words of Moses' song in the second canticle (*Deuteronomy* 32: 1-43), "the words of my mouth/ My doctrine shall drop as the rain..." become "idiot minstrelsy in rain" in Notes, II.vi.7, the mere senseless white noise of a "heavenly gong" (II.vi.9). Likewise, the "howling wilderness of the desert in this same canticle (No. II) metamorphoses into the Arab's "hoobla-how[ing]" (I.iii.14) and the lion's "roar[ing] at the enraging desert" (I.v.1). Another passage from Cantic II reads thus:

...for they are a very  
froward [sic] generation children in whom is no faith.  
(*Deuteronomy* 32.20)

Stevens revises it to:

These are the heroic children whom time breeds

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<sup>2</sup>Biblical quotations refer to the King James Version.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara M. Fisher claims, "While Stevens's relation to the romantic poets has been discussed in depth, his use of the language of Canticles and the imagery of speculative mysticism has not." (2-3) (emphasis added)

<sup>4</sup>As Eleanor Cook records John Hollander's once observing (*Word-Play* 228, n. 16).

Against the first idea... (I.v.19-20)

Other traces of the Canticles appear in Stevens' line: "A little string speaks for a crowd of voices," resonating with Canticle IV's "to the chief singer on my stringed instruments" (*Habakkuk* 3.19). Moreover, "Notes" section about the remnants of the planter's orchard (II.v) of lime and "orange trees [that] continued to bloom and to bear,/ Long after the planter's death" (II.v.2-3) is an inversion of Canticle IV's passage:

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail...Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. (*Habakkuk* 3.17-18)

If the Biblical character will praise God even though the trees fail to bear fruit, Stevens' inversion implies that his character will no longer "rejoice in the Lord" since the fruit trees continue to produce.

Stevens' vestige of the Jonah-and-the-whale story from Canticle VI exemplifies one of the most interesting "sea changes" in "Notes." The Biblical passage "and the Lord spake unto the fish, and vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" becomes "a beast disgorged" (III.vii.16-17), ambiguously portraying the beast either as actor or passive recipient of "disgorged."

The most revealing of Stevens' scriptural revisions is his modification of Canticle IX. Here, he drastically alters the Bible's famous prayer of Mary, "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (*Luke* 1.46). "Notes" trace of this passage reads: "And Eve made air the mirror of herself" (I.iv.3). Stevens replaces saintly Mary with a fallen and narcissistic Eve. In place of magnification of God, he

offers us reflection of man (or woman). Later in "Notes," he further secularizes the remains of Cantic IX by bringing it down to earth:

Tonight the lilacs magnify  
The easy passion, the ever-ready love  
Of the lover that lies within us...(II.viii.4-6)

Stevens' revision almost erases Christ's spiritual passion, changing it into an earthly erotic one. Apart from its sexual overtones, this phrase can be read as the inner element that "lies" by giving in to an "easy passion" for a comforting but "seducing hymn" / Him (II.vii.4,3) of a ready-made God. "The lover that lies within" can also be interpreted in light of Stevens' Adagia, "God is in me or else is not at all...(OP 198).

It is no wonder then, that Helen Vendler finds "something vaguely ecclesiastical" about the birds in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (EW 177). These criminal birds, "bloody wren," "felon jay," and "jug-throated robin" (robbin'=robbing?), like a "bloodless episcopus" (II.vi.14) of organized religion, seem to have usurped man's right of spontaneous musical praise. The birds' "single text, granite monotony" is like the "Ordinary," designated parts of a church mass. Their "bethous" compose an "idiot minstrelsy." Like faithful churchgoers, they mechanically repeat religious cant, "the phrases of a single phrase" (II.vi.11). With what I term a *ghost pun*, Stevens mocks these birds-cum-unthinking-churchgoers, suggesting that religious robots are "for the birds." Moreover, he assigns them a repetitive syllable that is meaningless unless

interpreted in the Byzantine system (*Pa, Bou, Gha, Di, Ke, Zo, Ni*)<sup>5</sup> since "ké" is part neither of the modern musical alphabet (*C,D,E,F, G, A, B*) nor of the modern set of solmization syllables (*do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti*).

Each bird has its own characteristic, mandatory song of only a few notes "tirelessly" repeated. Birdsong's short melodic phrases are reminiscent of the rigid church modes codified by Pope Gregory (Stevens' "Canon Aspirin"/ aspiring?)<sup>6</sup> from fragments of what were once spontaneously performed folksongs. In "Notes," Stevens reminds us that "to impose" either religious or musical "orders," ... "is not to discover" (III.vii.7-8). Our supreme fictions should have the complexity of a many-faceted "crystal" (III.x.21) revolving on its imaginary axis. Here, they are reduced instead to the songs of "tireless" bird-"chorister[s]" who present "one sole face, like a photograph of fate, glass-blower's destiny, bloodless...." (II.vi.10, &13-14). This rigid, brittle "glass-blower's" bubble is evocative of Santayana's saying: "A soul is but the last bubble of a long fermentation in the world" (54).

Stevens challenges the romantic notion of angelic birds by showing that man, too, can sing like an angel; compose elaborate forms for his songs (or poetry); and with the invention of the airplane in the twentieth century, is able even to fly. Stevens

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<sup>5</sup>A nineteenth-century invention naming the sounds of the Byzantine "echoi" (modes/ melodic formulas) by utilizing the first seven letters of the Greek alphabet and adding a consonant or vowel diphthong. (See Spyridon Peristeris' jacket notes.)

<sup>6</sup>Harold Bloom, in *The Poems of Our Climate*, writes that the "name 'Aspirin' probably plays upon the archaic meaning of 'aspires,' the *anders-streben* of Pater's '*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music...*'" (205).

mocks the birds with a tongue twister, a verbal feat of which no wren would be capable:

Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can  
Do all that angels can. (III.ix.1-2)

In its mocking of the religious mentality, this blasphemous tongue-twister resonates with another Stevens poem. In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (*CP* 59), "a jovial hullabaloo among the spheres" is invoked to:

... make widows wince. But fictive things  
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

Stevens exposes birdsong for what it is, not divine expression as the Romantics portrayed it, but the mere manifestation of sexual instinct, a mandated ritual:

...Whistle forced bugler,  
that bugles for the mate, nearby the nest, (III.ix.4-5)

Countering the Romantic poet's tendency to anthropomorphize birdsong, he underscores the fact (later proven by scientists) that birdcalls:

are not comparable to our spoken language, but only  
to those expressions such as yawning, wrinkling the  
brow, and smiling, which are experienced  
unconsciously as innate actions...(Lorenz 78)

As if to stress the difference between the bird's notes and those of a human being, "Notes" oscillates between its musical and verbal senses throughout the poem. Further, the poem plays with distinctions between "not" and "noting."

In section I.vi, Stevens modulates from Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" (I.iv) to Berkeley's "To perceive [or note] is to be." Mind only exists in what it does, "more fecund as principle than

particle" (I.x.4). It is manifested in "will, as a principle of the mind's being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself" (NA 10). For Stevens, not to note is not to be:

Not to be realized because not to  
Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because  
 Not to be realized. (I.vi.1-3) (emphases added)

The passage's many "e's" seem like free radicals, waiting to be combined with the many "nots" (metaphysical knots) into "notes." Alternating between silent and sounded "e's," the passage oscillates between the orthographic and the acoustic, just as the idea of "notes" oscillates between text and music in the poem, itself. What most strike the ear in this passage, and indeed throughout "Notes," are the reiterated "be's," both isolated as the word "be" and contained in other words ("begin," "ephebe," "become," "beyond," "bees," "disbelieved," "belonged," "bethou," "begat," "believe," "beneath," and the like). If all of these "b's" are meant to be read as the musical note, then "t" of the phrase "metaphysical t" (II.ii.12) could be construed as "ti," equaling the note "b," in the fixed-*do* solmization system. Moreover, the sound of the birds' "ké" could be read as the Greek letter "κ," conjectured by scholars to have corresponded to our modern note "b."<sup>7</sup> Considered in this light, the reiterated "b's" would provide yet another clue to reading "Notes" as Byzantine kanon and to answering Eleanor Cook's question in *Center and Labyrinth* (229): "Why does Jerome beget the tubas in 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' (II.i)?" The answer lies within the structure of Byzantine

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<sup>7</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Vol. 7, 668.

psalmody, wherein "the body of the verse is chanted upon a reciting note [the reiterated "b's" in "Notes"] ...called [the] 'tuba'" (Werner 435).

Construed as the leading tone in the key of C major, Stevens' paradoxical "noble" key of the common, all these repeated "b's" seem to modulate from the Byzantine *echoi* (modes) toward the modern system of tonality.

And major man...  
In being more than an exception part,

Though an heroic part, of the common.  
The major abstraction is the common, (CP 388)

On an infrastructural level, Stevens employs the device of "canon" which for musicians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant the rule by which other musical voices were derived. Unlike his "aspiring" Canon (Canon Aspirin in the poem), Stevens does not "impose" his rule but instead allows us to "discover" the rule by which he derives "Notes" many voices, the polyphony of personifications in "Notes" twenty-two fables. Thus, the ephebe's appearance at the outset of "Notes" ("Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea of this...invented world") initiates the device or "canon" through which the other voices in the poem are derived. The ephebe's "voluble dumb violence" (I.v.16), his unspoken thoughts and perceptions seem to revolve (voluble derives from the Latin "volvere" = to turn or revolve) and set in motion an oscillating linguistic generator. At the beginning of

"Notes," *Phoebus* is dead, but the *ephebe* seems to rise from his name like a *phoenix*.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Eve, who "made air the mirror of herself," "founds" a place for a further linguistic metamorphosis into a "bare board" which, like the sounding board of a piano or stringed instrument, represents the potential for sound. The "bare board" then transforms into actualized sound, the lion's roar. One arrives at an understanding of Stevens' "canon" by noting<sup>9</sup> how he "carries the remainders" of words. Thus:

Eve made air the mirror of herself

*becomes*

The air is not a mirror but bare board

*becomes*

The lion roars at the enraging desert

Most definitely, this particular lion is an alter-ego for the poet-Stevens, who desired to be the "lion in the lute" (*CP* 175), since he is "master by foot [poetic foot], jaw [speech], and by the mane [poet speaks for the multitude]" (I.v.4). Other animal noises, the "elephant's" [memory] "b<sup>l</sup>ares" and the "bear's" [intuition] "snarls" sound in counterpoint with the lion's roar. As voice-incarnations for the poet, these three noble animals are potential surrogates for the Stevensian "noble rider" (*NA* 3-36). By the end of section I.v, these animals appear to be in a circus. They, like

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<sup>8</sup>Eleanor Cook, in *Poetry, Word-Play and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, observes, "The name of Phoebus dies into the uncreated, but part of it re-emerges in the word 'ephebe'." (219)

<sup>9</sup>Joan Richardson points out that the lion, symbolizing Mark of the Gospels, might underscore the idea of "marking" (as in "noting") or attending to a particular detail.

Adam and Eve and the "we" of section I.iv, "live in a place that is not [their] own" (i.iv.13-14).

Meanwhile, the ephebe (young man) lies silently upon the bed in his attic room, containing an instrument that is not his own, a "rented piano":

But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,  
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie

In silence upon your bed. ...

...you look  
Across the roofs as sigil and ward  
And in your centre mark them and are cowed...(I.v.11-  
13, 16-18)

Since it is an "attic" ("Greek") window from which the ephebe-poet views the world, it is almost impossible for him to unearth a pristine "first idea" because his ideas are always-already "mudd[ie]d" by this "centre" of Western thought. It is tempting to think that the ephebe, who is "in a place that is not [his] own," is held as a "ward" and moreover, that he is not quite himself since he is "cowed" (I.v.17-18). Rather than emitting a natural sound like the lion's roar, the elephant's blare, or the bear's snarl, the ephebe must use a prosthetic device, a "rented piano," in order to make his music. Moreover, his instrument has fixed keys and a musical system that was established prior to ("preceding") his tenure.

By writing that the ephebe-poet is a "sigil" and a "ward," Stevens plays with the idea of key signature/tonality and hence, with the idea of musical order. Like a key signature, the poet as "sigil" or sign has a duty to "name flatly, waste no words" (III.x.7).

Heralding his time's modality, he is a signal every bit as timely and prophetic as the "chorister whose c preceded the choir" (*CP* 534). But as a "ward," he is impeded since he is a prisoner of language. His lines are like the "fitful tracings of a portal" in "Peter Quince at the Clavier." He is both guardian and liberator of the language.

Two other meanings of "ward" imply that the poet is both part of a keyhole or a key: "a projecting ridge of metal in a lock casing or keyhole permitting only the insertion of a key with a corresponding notch; also a corresponding notch in a bit of a key" (Webster's *NTID* 2575). Performing one of the mental contortions required for the understanding of Stevens' poetry, we transpose the notch in a key to the notion of a key in music. Hence, the poet constructs the "sounds that stick,/ Inevitably modulating (like the modulations of musical keys) in the blood" (Coda l.16-17).

To be valid, the Stevensian supreme fiction, unlike monotonous bird tunes, must be fluid, "must change". Like his precursor Emerson, Stevens feels that all rigid hierarchies are harmful: "Each truth is a sect though no bells ring for it" (*CP* 462). Expressing his desire to thwart the rigid structures of his forefathers, he writes, "I want to be the lion in the lute facing the lion locked in stone."<sup>10</sup> Stevens seeks to relinquish cant for the spontaneity of chance/ chants--to return to the original, unbridled joy of the true sense of one's spirit. As the "supreme fiction," poetry "must give pleasure:" "Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language" (*OP* 199).

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<sup>10</sup>Wallace Stevens in a Letter to Renato Poggioli, dated July 1, 1953

In a letter responding to Barbara Church's note about an experience she had during a tour through a European church, Stevens writes:

Your boy opening his arms before the altar and singing some hymn of the German soul was expressing his experience of the glory of the church through which he had just conducted you. Mais oui--he probably does it once an hour, every day, excluding an hour for lunch. Yet as a gesture of elation it was a gesture of the highest truth on the part of the man who first thought of it and its daily repetition merely makes it ritual. (LWS 842)

Though a ritual, the boy's gesture retained the trace of the originator's joy. In "Notes," quotidien repetition is elevated to the level of the heroic.

Perhaps,  
The man-hero is not an exceptional monster,  
But he that is of repetition most master. (III.ix.19-21)

After all, daily repetition,<sup>11</sup> for the master musician, is the means by which he practices and improves his craft.

If, however, through unthinking repetition, language becomes outworn, it must be renewed, "invented," given new musical airs. In short, "it must change." Stevens commands his angel in its "luminous cloud" to be silent...and hear" a nebulous and synaesthetic music, "the luminous melody of proper sound." Here, the word "proper," meaning "to name without describing," also suggests the *Proper* as the musical sections of the religious mass that vary according to the day or occasion (Webster's *TNID* 1817-18). Thus, the poet's "song" would be both: (1) like the "abstraction blooded, as a man by thought" (*CP* 385) since "proper

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<sup>11</sup>*Répétition*, in French, means *rehearsal*.

nouns name a *specific* person and (2) it would be "the cry of its occasion" (CP 473), as in the proper of a mass which celebrates a specific day or occasion in the church calendar. Moreover, "proper," in the sense of "own," harkens back to "Notes" line "we live in a place that is not our own" (I.iv.13-14).

In utilizing his canon, Stevens attempts to adopt an appropriate (proper) language for modern man, while trying to recover the freshness of "lingua franca" and "jocundissima (II.ix.21)." *Lingua franca* was a form of mixed jargon, largely Italian, used by the people of Western Europe to converse with Arabs (like the one in section I.iii of "Notes") and other peoples of the Mediterranean. Within this context, Stevens introduces the "hoobla-how[ing]" Arab, thereby providing a clue to his use of the Byzantine kanon since "Arabic music inherited an enormous amount of the Byzantine aesthetic" (Pérès liner notes) *Jocundissima*, containing the Latin root, "jocundus," meaning "pleasant," compounded with the Italian superlative ending "issima," renders the meaning "most gay". The word "jocundissima" conjures up composers' performance instructions, usually written in Italian, e.g. "pianissimo" and "fortissimo."

Stevens "chaffers the time away" (II.ix.7), uncovering the roots of a melismatic, joyful chant—a song without words. He asks, "Is there a poem that never reaches words" (II.ix.6)? We become a "vagabond in metaphor" (II.x.13), as much the nomad as the chanting Arabian of section I. Stevens "rubs" language (II.x.19) into "rubbish" (II.iii.21), "life's nonsense," (I.iii.21):

And still the grossest iridescence of ocean

Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls. (I.iii.19-20)

Without the consonants of speech to stop or "balk the elements" (III.iv.15), we are nomads in sound. Thus the "mystic marriage" (III.iv.4) of language, a yoking of reason's "click-clack" with "romantic intoning" (I.viii.4 & 1), is represented by the wedding fable of the captain and Bawda, symbolizing sense and sound respectively (III.iv.). Stevens orchestrates the wedding tale with white noise, the "shoo-shoo-shoo of secret cymbals round" (III.iv.13). These cymbals/symbols, like the ceaseless play of meaning in language, are "stopp[ed]" by a "short sign," in music, another way of designating "*staccato*" notes of brief duration, paralleled by the Captain and Bawda's temporary but "revered...marriage place." The "invention" of speech generates the "invented world," a domicile amidst the untamed "whirlwind" (III. iv.15).

Similarly, a musical system, with its invented home base, or tonic, generates the risings and fallings, the tensions and psychological resting places of a traditional musical phrase. Even a newborn infant, inherently capable of responding to the rhythmic and tonal order of a lullaby, is far from being a musical "tabula rasa." Much like "the first idea," the sense of a musical order exists à priori to our taking in our first breath of air in order to sing:

...The clouds preceded us

There was a muddy centre before we breathed. (I.iv.9-10)

Here, lack of punctuation after the first line and its abrupt elision into the second give "us" no time to breathe before the

"muddy centre." In effect, we are contained in the preceding clouds as we listen to the homonym "pre-seeded." Note the repetitions on "c" in its sound variants, in the words "clouds," "preceded," and "center." In these lines, "centre" appears in its British spelling, suggesting Great Britain as the "muddy centre" before we existed as the American nation. Through his last poem's "chorister whose c preceded the choir" (*CP* 534), the tonality of *C Major* pervades Stevens' *oeuvre*, intoning "major man," the commonal.

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.  
There was a myth before the myth began,  
Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (l.iv.13-15)

Stevens claims, "God is the centre of the pathetic fallacy" (*LWS* 444). Either the poem "springs"/ takes its origin from this fallacy, from the "myth before the myth" or it "springs" away "from" this myth like one of Stevens' "liquid cats" (*CP* 178). In the latter sense, the poet/man refuses to remember his place, preferring rather to construct his own durable reality. This ability to adopt new constructs through the flexibility of language allows us to domesticate the world, making it possible for us to "live in a place that is not our own." Thus, the poet's role is to construct the "necessary fiction" without which we cannot endure:

What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or  
was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to  
which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and

that he gives to life the supreme fictions without  
which we are unable to conceive of it. (NA 31)

Stevens' orchestration moves from the concept of a tonal center ("the muddy centre") to the potential of harnessing "air" for musical sound. The "clouds" as "pedagogues" (I.iv.16-17) show that "air" can be realized as a musical "air." Musical instruments seem to grow out of the "preced[ing]" (pre-seeding) clouds and to produce tiny seeds, "pips" of their own:

Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips  
Of the sweeping meanings we add to them. (I.iv.20-21)

Actually, a "pip" is the onomatopoeic rendering of the sound a bird makes. Are these "abysmal instruments" those of the pit musicians in a theater? If so, Stevens plays a musical joke, having his pit musicians make sounds like pips, one meaning of which is "a small seed." A "pip" is also the pecking that a bird does in breaking out of its shell, suggesting that the canon or sound principle generating the poem's many fables is given birth through the insemination of seed-like "notes."

"To be seen" (noted) is, for Stevens, "to be realized" (I.vi). In one of his many idiosyncratic "it" passages in which the "it" pronoun is impossible to connect to any definite antecedent,<sup>12</sup> "it" here, is unrealized because "it" has neither a proper noun/name nor a habitation:

It must be visible or invisible,  
Invisible or visible or both:  
A seeing and unseeing in the eye. (I.vi.16-18)

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<sup>12</sup>Stevens' stenographer complained of his confusing pronominal use. (LWS 655)

Since for a painter to "realize" is to depict, Stevens playfully chooses the painter Franz Hals, who never depicted weather, and, through "ekphrasis,"<sup>13</sup> creates a poetic realization of a nonexistent painting as if to answer the question, "What would a Franz Hals rendition of the weather be like?" Suddenly, it dawns that weather is "realized," perceivable air. Stevens clarifies this point in one of his letters:

This morning I thought it would be pleasant, instead of coming to the office to walk a little in the park near the house and try to realize: réalizer, the weather. (LWS 828)

For the musician, to "realize" would be to sit at a keyboard instrument and play the full harmony indicated by the musical shorthand of a figured bass. The musician-performer's alchemy turns numbers into notes. The numerical symbols of figured bass are like "exponents" (II.ix.5), indicating chords and their positions. Interpreted thus, a figured bass tells the performer how to "conjugate" chords or fill in the "outline of a fugue" (III.v.17). Until it is actively performed, the poem-as-score ("notes" on a page) merely consists of "the shoo-shoo-shoo of secret [musical/letter] cymbals"/symbols on "a page of music"(II.x.4) unrealized because unplayed. Described in figured bass terms, even the Canon Aspirin's sister's children are parts of "the whole,/ the complicate, the amassing harmony" (III.vi.21):

...She had two daughters, one  
Of four, and one of seven...(III.v.4-5)(emphases added)

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<sup>13</sup>John Hollander, currently at work on "ekphrasis," observed this irony in the title, "Weather by Franz Hals."



produce various pitches by "stopping" the vibrations of the string at different points along its length. "Nam[ing] elements in a "fluent mundo" is like setting up a system of tonality by putting "frets" on a musical instrument. The linguistic markers are like a "compos[ed]" domestic "stop" (I.vii.4), enabling us to understand the world, the "fat girl, terrestrial" (III.x). "Fret" can also mean an erosion, or the act of devouring or wearing away. Stevens' frettings puzzlingly "gnaw away" (OED VI.184-187) "the blank" as though he is searching for a way to "evade" (I.ix) a black hole, an area so dense it draws all material into it. Like a black hole, "blank verse" with its many illustrious "exponents" threatens to consume the modern poet who exploits it; he risks being drawn into the specific gravity of its famous users (e.g. Shakespeare and the like). Since "life is not free from its forms" (*OP* 196), the form and strictures of blank verse can turn the modern poet into a mere "mimic" (I.iv.16) of old language and forms, a "spot of decay" (obsolete meaning of "fret").

Stevens "fret"[s] in double-edged fashion, creating new "keener sounds" through finer "demarcations" (*CP* 130) while eroding an archaic ecclesiastical form of music (kanon) through a process akin to Simone Weil's "decreation": "We have to be nothing in order to be in our right place in the whole" (353).<sup>16</sup> For Stevens, "words are of things that do not exist without the words" (*NA* 32). His "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" appears to decreate language to a "pip" or point ("Notes" III.vi. 3-4, 15-16).

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<sup>16</sup>Stevens was familiar with Simone Weil's term "decreation," as is evidenced by *NA* 174-175.

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,

Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought,

By cueing us into the compositional strategy of "Notes," Stevens helps us to understand the fecund imaginative principle behind all creation: "God and the imagination are one" (*CP* 524).

The first idea is an imagined thing.  
The pensive giant prone in violet space.

Orchestrated with inevitable elision, the sound of the line enables us to hear "inviolable space," that which is uncorrupted by even a "first idea" (I.iv.1). "Violet" as a *viola d'amore* (Italian = "viol of love") is a playful embedding of Stevens' wife's middle name, "Viola," replacing the spiritual "first idea" with an earthly embodiment "more fecund" (I.x.4). The many oscillations between "first idea" and its realizations, between imagination and reality strike an almost musical balance:

...not balances  
That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.  
(I.vii.14-16)

This desired sexual-musical balance occurs during the course of each of "Notes" three tenth odes, Stevens' significant addition to the kanon form. Transformations of spirit between male and female (like the previously mentioned ephebe-Cinderella metamorphosis) reach consummation when the Odysseus-poet figure "beyond the town...in his old coat,...and sagging pantaloons"

(I.x.18), the "vagabond in metaphor" (II.x.13) becomes "realized" as the Penelope figure (III.x) "bent over work" (her weaving?)(III.x). Resonating meaningfully with the "soldier, there is a war section," these three tenth odes underscore the need for modern man to make a crucial transition in spirit from the warlike Odysseus to the weaving Penelope.

If "God is Dead" as Nietzsche claims, then man can no longer "compose a castle-fortress-home" (I.viii.1) in the sense of Martin Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."<sup>17</sup> Otherwise, he risks merely resuscitating old forms like the medieval architectural renovations of "Viollet-le-duc" (I.viii.2). Interestingly enough, Viollet-le-duc's anachronistic anomalies are underscored by the homonym contained within his name: "Violet" implies the French word "violer," meaning "to violate." Stevens' imaginative mode of recreation of the Byzantine kanon parallels Viollet-le-Duc's method of medieval restoration, "To restore an edifice is not to reconstruct it; it is to reestablish it in a complete condition which may never have existed at any given moment" (Bercé 9).<sup>18</sup> By renovating and reinhabiting the kanon form, Stevens "reestablishes" it in a more complete condition that responds to the ongoing needs of modern man. Moreover, his "kanon" expresses optimism in our recombinant creative principle as a perpetual generator.

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<sup>17</sup>Eleanor Cook has also noted this link between Stevens and Luther, although not in the same connection (*Word-Play* 228).

<sup>18</sup>Violet-le-Duc. "Restauration," *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*. (Paris, 1854-1868); rpt. (Paris, De Nobele, 1967) Vol. 8, 14.

The "ké" of Stevens' ecclesiastical birds, when transcribed as the sound of the Greek word for "and" (καί), suggests that we continue creating "supreme fiction[s]" to connect the past with the future "toward" which we aspire. We cannot continue "looking for what was, where it used to be" (I.x.16). The philosopher-poet domesticates an abode for man in a chaotic universe. He "appoints man's place in music" (I.ii.11) because music, like the successive embodiments (realizations) of spirit in individual beings, exists in motion and eternal change. Stevens' "Notes" is like a game of metaphysical musical chairs, stripping away scriptural fictions, fretting away at the blank of the cosmos, and realizing a difficult modern counterpoint to the Biblical phrase "In my Father's house, there are many mansions" (John 14.2).

### VIII. "Silent Rhapsodist"

Silence is the only voice of our God.  
(Herman Melville)

Silence is the most potent "instrument" a composer has at his disposal. At a performance's beginning, there is the pregnant silence in which distinctions between the audience's silence and that of the orchestra are blurred. Richard Strauss exploits this expectant silence in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* wherein "music falls on the silence like a sense" (CP 392). He scores an extremely low (both in pitch and dynamics) *C* for contrabassoon, double basses, organ, plus bass drum, barely perceptible except as vague rumbling in the soles of the feet, the pit of the stomach, or against the surface of the eardrum. *Zarathustra* grows from utter silence to a musical universe through the umbilical cord of this almost inaudible low pitch that "seem[s] like a sound in...[our] mind" (CP 534).

In music's special relativity, silence becomes timed space. Scored rests hold the spatial volume of prescribed amounts of silence. Through musical notation, the composer can insure that performers of his music will be silent uniformly. A whole symphony orchestra feels the same silence because it is measurable within the prevailing tempo. The musical metronome's markings, though based on the standard minute, rearticulate its divisions beyond the conventions of chronology.

The singer or wind instrumentalist avails himself of the notated pause to inhale another breath with which to propel him

through a new musical phrase. Armed with this knowledge, a clever orchestrator will often dovetail various wind parts, passing the melody between instruments to ensure long, seamless lines. During rests, string players often "retake" the bow in order to place it in a more convenient spot to produce the ensuing notes. In this way, musical rests "defy" physics in that they encompass motion within rest, containing not only the motion of the musicians' breathing and bowing techniques, but also the motion of meaningful time as an integral part of the ongoing music.

Musical silence, much like Stevens' "River of Rivers in Connecticut," is seemingly a "black cataract," but has a relativity all its own because it is "space-filled." Far from being empty, it envelops the space of time made meaningful, "intentful" soundlessness. The continuum of the rest's time valence forces us to anticipate and listen for a future filled with notes.

The contrast provided by silence alters our feeling of the music, rendering it more potent. In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James comments on silence's potency, "The *feeling* of the thunder is also a feeling of the silence as just gone" (234). He claims that past experience "remold[s]" us in such a way that our reactions to specific impressions are the cumulative effect of every experience we have had up to that point. Just "as one color succeeding another is modified by the contrast, [and] silence sounds delicious after noise," so too, "every brain-state is partly determined by the nature of [the] entire past succession" of events. For James, music aptly illustrates the kind of effect that experience has on our consciousness because "in music the whole aesthetic

effect comes from the manner in which one set of sounds alters our feeling of another" (228-229).

In *The Rock*, the final section of *The Collected Poems*, Stevens orchestrates our feeling by incorporating silence into his poems. In this last volume of poetry, he explores silence in much the same way the painter Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), in his final phase, explores the subtle gradations of "the blacknesses of black" (CP 507): He "studies silence and himself" (CP 447). In contrast to the dense musical orchestrations of earlier poems (particularly the many instruments mentioned in *Harmonium*), these later poems explore the sounds of silence. However, the poet who would use silence is not as fortunate as the composer who has a set of notational rest values upon which to draw. Thus, Stevens is forced to create the effect of silence by means of syntactic tactics: ellipses, blank spaces, rhythmic entropy, and the like. Mallarmé's use of "evocation, allusion, and suggestion" (40) directed Stevens.

Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships--all this contributing to the rhythmic totality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way. ...in the very spaces which isolate the stanzas, and all through the whiteness of the page--meaningful silence...(Mallarmé 41, 122)

As a younger poet, Stevens "hear[d] himself/ Sounded in music" (CP 194). In his earlier poems, music is a paradigm for "feeling" ("Music is feeling then, not sound"), an apt descriptor of various emotional stages. These poems are filled with musical instruments, musical forms, and instrumental effects in contrast to

the poems of *The Rock* which explore "the faculty of ellipsis" (CP 49). These poems can be heard as a falling silent, an autobiographical parallel to the aging process: "A little less returned for him each spring./ Music began to fail him" (CP 148).

In general, we slow up anyhow as time passes. We think and pretend that it is voluntary. ...the process of growing old accelerates the longer it continues, so that one seems to grow old faster today than one did yesterday. I know that I am much slower than I was...(LWS 848, 856)

The actual word "silence" or its variants ("silences," "silently," "silent"--see chart at end of chapter), rhythmic entropy, and pregnant pauses (dashes, ellipses) become "imaginative transcripts" (CP 479) of musical silence, a way of auditioning death. Orthographic ellipses function geometrically in Stevens, trajecting the cycle of life through the *oeuvre complet* of *The Collected Poems*.

Toward the end of his life, Stevens wrote the Bollingen prefaces to Valéry's *Dialogues*. The quotes he chose to incorporate in his prefaces significantly foreground silence. One passage in particular echoes thoughts he may have had in looking backward upon his own life and career.

Must I be silent, Phaedrus? --So you will never know what temples, what theatres, I should have conceived in the pure Socratic style! ...And exercising an ever stricter control over my mind, at the highest point I should have realized the operation of transforming a quarry and a forest into an edifice, into splendid equilibriums!...

Then out of raw materials I was going to put together my structures entirely ordained for the life and joy of the rosy race of men. ...But you shall learn

no more. You can conceive only the old Socrates, and your stubborn shade....(Valéry xiv)

Stevens then muses upon silence and death as he comments on "the substance of the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus":

And what in fact have they been talking about? And why is Valéry justified when, in his closing words, Socrates says: "...all that we have been saying is as much a natural sport of the silence of these nether regions as the fantasy of some rhetorician of the other world who has used us as puppets!" Have we been listening to the talk of men or of puppets? These questions are parts of the fundamental question, What should the shades of men talk about, or in any case what may they be expected, categorically, to talk about, in the Elysian fields? (xiv)

To imagine the total soundlessness of death may have been difficult for Stevens since, suffering from a condition of ringing or swishing in the ears known as *tinnitus*, he never really composed from a silent head. Even at night with his head upon the pillow, he would have heard incessant internal noises: "As the night conceives sea-sounds in silence" (CP 86). Thus, his silence was never entire, a condition expressive of modern life wherein electricity makes even the quietest moments of our lives hum.

Whereas for the musician executing silence is merely a natural function of his craft, the poet's incorporation of silence in his poetry would seem to wreak "voluble dumb violence" (CP 384) upon language. And yet the American writer Edith Wharton comments on silence's potential to communicate: "Silence may be as variously shaded as speech" (169); and Thoreau writes, "All Sounds, and more than all, silence, do fife and drum for us".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, III (Boston, 1949) 332.

Stevens exploits this potential in *The Rock*, finding various ways in which to orchestrate the feel of silence.

In *The Rock*, the actual word "silence" (or "silent") occurs frequently. Often it is linked with sleep or drowsiness. The first poem of the volume, "An Old Man Asleep," tells of "two worlds [that] are asleep, are sleeping, now." Both "the self and the earth" are "possesse[d of the silence of] a "dumb sense." The dash at the center of this poem is the literary equivalent of a musical rest. It is used to denote a silent sleeping "self" and "world" in which oncoming death is compared to the "drowsy motion of the river R" (are), a symbolic Jamesian *stream of thought* (*Prin. Psych.* 219-278).

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping now.  
A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth - your thoughts, your feelings,  
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,  
The River motion, the drowsy motion of the river R.  
(CP 501)

"The peculiar plot" of Stevens' life history is silenced by the "plot" of ground in which he will be laid to rest.

"The Irish Cliffs of Moher" starts with the question, "Who is my father in this world, in this house,/ At the spirit's base?" This quest for origin, "the spirit's base" -- both like the "base" of a mountain and like the fundamental (bass) note of a chord -- leads to another silence, notated as the literary "rest" of a hyphen:

My father's father, his father's father, his-  
Shadows like winds (CP 501)

This passage parodies the famous Biblical passage about "begatting" in *Genesis* 5.3-32 through an inverse evolution. Here, the dash, in the capacity of an ellipsis, functions as an orchestrated moment of silent thought, an analeptic reach. Stevens' "shadows" echo Valéry's Socrates who says: "...you have certainly noticed what weight and what significance are assumed by the very least of little words, and the smallest of silences that falls between them" (*Dialogues* 72).

Stevens' description of the ancestors portrays them as ancient shades of the dead, "shadows like winds," synaesthetically combining the murky sight of shadows with the unseen winds perceived only indirectly through their blowing of trees and leaves, or their "touch" upon the human skin. As an orchestration, these "winds" (musical woodwinds) suggest the reed "base" of Stevens' harmonium.<sup>2</sup> The very last poem of *The Rock* ("Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself") will further trace the wind instrument's ancestry back to its earliest predecessor, the naked human voice as "the chorister whose *c* preceded the choir." Stevens extends the genealogical quest in "The Irish Cliffs of Moher" by instructing us to "go back to a parent before thought, before speech,/ At the head of the past." He traces our roots in speech back to silent, direct experience of the apparent (*a + parent*) world. This tracing helps us discover a vivid fresh language, one that "will suffice" as the adequate "cry of its occasion."

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<sup>2</sup>Remember that originally Stevens wanted to call his *Collected Poems*, "The Whole of Harmonium."

Rising out of present time and place, above  
The wet, green grass.

This is not landscape, full of the somnambulations  
Of poetry

And the sea. This is my father or, maybe,  
It is as he was,

A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth  
And sea and air.

Ultimately, the poem cadences on the elements of our world, leaving the potential for "air" unrealized (as either speech or song) as its final word.

In his later years, Stevens, looking back retrospectively upon his career, strongly identified with the composer Beethoven.

If Beethoven could look back on what he had accomplished and say that it was a collection of crumbs compared to what he had hoped to accomplish, where should I ever find a figure of speech adequate to size up the little that I have done compared to that which I had once hoped to do. Of course, I have had a happy and well-kept life. But I have not even begun to touch the spheres within spheres that might have been possible if, instead of devoting the principal amount of my time to making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry. (*LWS* 669, letter dated February 17, 1950)

Negatively assessing his life and artistic accomplishments, Stevens metaphorically expresses the feeling of "the end of imagination" as the "blank cold" of a dilapidated house in "The Plain Sense of Things" (*CP* 502).

The great structure has become a minor house.  
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.  
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.

A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition  
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

The dilapidated house also symbolizes the church, deteriorated in its ability to serve modern man's needs. Stevens wrote, "God and the imagination are one" (CP 524), suggesting that the ability to create a "supreme fiction" (God) manifests the highest human imagination. Lack of this propelling imagination renders us "natives of a dwindled sphere" (CP 504). The "absence of the imagination" is orchestrated as "silence."

Yet the absence of the imagination had  
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
The plain sense of it, without reflectors, leaves,  
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
The great pond and its waste of lilies, all this  
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
Required, as a necessity requires.

Similar to Beethoven whose rhythmic conceptions are full of sudden changes, surprises, turn-arounds, shifts in dynamics, and dramatic pauses, Stevens often uses the pause, orchestrated orthographically as a dash or an ellipsis, to effect a surprising shift in thought. Describing one such compelling pause and subsequent musical-mental shift in Beethoven's *Egmont Overture*, Pitts Sanborn, Stevens' Harvard classmate, friend, and program annotator for the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society, wrote:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Stevens enjoyed Sanborn's pamphlet *Beethoven and His Nine Symphonies*, (New York: Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, 1939): "Your pamphlet on Beethoven's Symphonies is on my table at home and occasionally I take it up just to hear you talk; it is naturally full of your intonations" (LWS 342).

The main body of the overture (F minor, Allegro, 3-4) sets forth the mighty struggle. At its height there is a sudden pause. Eight measures, marked *ppp*, which suggest a brief requiem, begin a long modulatory passage to F major, the key of the triumphant coda (Allegro con brio). (Program notes, 1940-41 season)

In Beethoven's music, the surprises are not so much rhythmic as dynamic or harmonic. A sudden pause will be followed by an abrupt dynamic change or an excruciating harmony. In both Beethoven and Stevens, silence makes space for a jarring change. However, Stevens orchestrates silence in orthographic terms as the absence of words. For him, "that wide water without [or outside of sound] sound" (CP 70) is the amniotic space of thought itself.

Thus, in "The Hermitage at the Center" (CP 505), Stevens "dissolve[s]" music through "noise," "tintinnabula," and seven end-of-line dashes used as musical rests.

The leaves on the macadam make a noise-  
How soft the grass on which the desired  
Reclines...

Here, Stevens uses the silence of the dash to orchestrate a difficult synaptic leap. Utilizing a Beethovenesque sudden pause and equally abrupt dynamic change, he underscores a disjuncture between the acoustical "noise" of the leaves skittering on gravel<sup>4</sup> and the sensory "soft" feel of the grass upon which the "desired" one rests. This rest effects synaptic synaesthesia, the pause allowing for tectonic plates of hearing and touch to rub jarringly against one another. Stevens appropriately employs the dash, as the orthographic equivalent of a musical rest, to score the sound of

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<sup>4</sup>"Macadam," in keeping with *The Rock*, consists of broken rock.

the absent "desired." The ambiguous syntax of the phrase "the leaves on the macadam make a noise," lacking a verb of movement between "leaves" and the preposition "on," blurs distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, initially seducing us into thinking that leaves are somehow growing on the macadam.

This poem shifts elusively from "noise" ("The leaves on the macadam make a noise") to a "ring" which resonates with dual auditory and visual meanings.

And yet this end and this beginning are one,  
And one last look at the ducks is a look  
At lucent children round her in a ring.

Here, further erasing language into the silence of "unintelligible thought," Stevens' referent for "her" is an ambiguous "desired" one, who is "dissolve[d]" into the absence within a "ring."

Full of Beethovenesque surprises, Stevens similarly uses an ellipsis as a musical rest in "Vacancy in the Park" (CP 511).

March...Someone has walked across the snow,  
Someone looking for he knows not what.

Here, the ellipsis as "vacancy" after the word "March" allows for time to respond to this word ambiguously as either a command or a season. During this gap, Stevens puts us in the place of the questing "someone" who searches aimlessly. Appearing as it does at the beginning of the poem, "March" also serves as a musical tempo marking for the brisk walking necessary to keep warm in the chill of early spring. Like visual footprints, the ellipsis after "March" seems to follow the path of the poem's absent "someone." In keeping with *The Rock's* overall theme of testing silence in preparation for death, "Vacancy in the Park" traces the "vacancy"

of silence through erstwhile sound, orchestrated for an abandoned guitar.

It is like a guitar left on a table  
By a woman who has forgotten it.

In "The Green Plant" (CP 506), the season of autumn is compared to the winding down of life described in terms of bedtime preparation, "a turning down toward reality." The poem shows Stevens' recognition of the impossibility of return to the music/feeling of his younger years:

The effete vocabulary of summer  
No longer says anything.

Even this dissolving of language and music conveys a message about life. "Silence is a part of information, musical as well as linguistic" (Leonard B. Meyer 30). For Stevens, silence speaks volumes about change in the universe as "roses" turn "to paper." Autumn's ravages are compared to the silence of a musical rest. "Silence is a shape that has passed" conjures up the image of a performing musician reading the notational shape of a rest.

So connected is sound with life that our figures of speech link death with silence: "we speak of 'dead silence' and of 'deathly stillness'" (Burrows 22). In "Madame La Fleurie" (CP 507), death's silence becomes heavy sleepiness and forgetfulness: "Weight him down, O side-stars, with the great weightings of the end." Synaptic synaesthesia through homonymic word-play makes the "great weightings" = "waitings" or long pauses, possibly the equivalent of rests with *fermatas* over them. The silence of death is further translated through synaesthesia into an absence of color:

The black fugatos are strumming blacknesses of  
black...

The thick strings stutter the finial gutturals. (CP 507)

Stevens' choice of black to describe death's silence reflects Wassily Kandinsky's (1866-1944) theory in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that black signifies "a totally dead silence...a silence with no possibilities." Kandinsky claims that black "in music ...is represented by one of those profound and final pauses, after which any continuation of the melody seems the dawn of another world" (39).

In "The Green Plant," silence had shape. Here, in "Madame La Fleurie," silence is played on an instrument that is really a musical form: *fugato*, a piece bearing elements of, but not strictly comprising, a contrapuntal fugue. "Fugatos" become stringed instruments,<sup>5</sup> played by strumming. In this passage, "fugato" (Italian for "flight") etymologically embeds flight from death within the very instruments which strum the blackness of our destruction. These instruments play final (archaic meaning of "finial") sounds which are "strange," "unpleasant," and produce the effect of inarticulate silence as "gutturals," sounds that "do not occur in standard English" (Webster's *TNID* 1014). These sounds reminiscently stammer the ultimate meaninglessness of the "great structure" of the dilapidated church in "The Plain Sense of Things," since "finials" are the finishing ornaments on gothic structures and "gutturals" suggest distorted "gutters." Oddly enough, these

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<sup>5</sup>Musicians, when analyzing the structure of a symphony, speak, for example, of how "the violins, rather than the violinists, at letter *B* play *arpeggios*," commonly referring to the instrument rather than the performer(s). Thus, I have interpreted the "fugatos" here to be a type of instrument.

"gutturals" contain the "gut" material out of which strings are made, presumably for the "black fugatos."

"To An Old Philosopher in Rome" (*CP* 508) about the dying philosopher, George Santayana, begins by depicting the pulling inward of death as the muting of sounds:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street  
 Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement  
 Of men grown small in the distances of space,  
 Singing with smaller and still smaller sound,  
 Unintelligible absolution and an end-

Here, the dash after "end-" orchestrates silence, portrays that which is beyond metaphor, pictures death as a post-linguistic event. The unimaginable, "unintelligible" is translated through legible but inarticulate orthographic silence. In these last moments of perspectival diminishment, the self melds with others and the universe, and is enhanced by silent intuitive understanding of "the celestial possible":

To join in a hovering excellence, to escape  
 From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.  
 Speak to your pillow as if it was yourself.  
 Be orator but with an accurate tongue  
 and without eloquence, O, half-asleep,  
 Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,

This perspectival diminishment reduces us to a kind of dense point, like a black hole (suggested by the passage's many reiterated *o*'s) containing all selves and all senses in an "illuminated" mirror which synaesthetically echoes our own voice (suggested by the replicated *o* within "room"):

So that we feel, in this illumined large,  
 The veritable small, so that each of us

Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice  
In yours...

During this moment, it is paradoxically possible to speak in silence, to articulate death's "tragic accent" (*CP* 510): "it is you that speak it without speech." This fusion of self with the universe is orchestrated as bells. Sound takes transcendent shape, "realized" as the architecture of the "total grandeur of a total edifice" (*CP* 510-11). For the dying Santayana, the enveloping sound of the bells metamorphoses into the architecture of both the remembered buildings of Rome and that of his new chosen heaven.

The sounds drift in. The buildings are remembered.  
The life of the city never lets go, nor do you  
Ever want it to. It is part of the life in your room.  
Its domes are the architecture of your bed.  
The bells keep on repeating solemn names

In choruses and choirs of choruses,  
Unwilling that mercy should be a mystery  
Of silence...

Final enlightenment expresses itself in an implicit trope: the "total edifice" = edification (*aedificare* in Latin = "to instruct or improve spiritually," according to Webster). Again, Stevens' words resonate with Valéry's in *Eupalinos, or The Architect*: "...I find myself again by the surprises I give myself; by means of the successive steps of my silence, I advance in my own edification" (81). Ultimately in "To an Old Philosopher" silence assumes architectural strength, like the voluble space of faith contained by a Gothic Cathedral's vaulted ribs.

In "Prologues to What is Possible" (*CP* 515), a poem that faintly echoes Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre," the questing boat-traveler speculates on the potential for all men to discover their

own noble core of humanity, "a point of central arrival," similar to the crossing of the "threshold" of enlightenment in "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" (*CP* 521). This enlightenment would make all language lucid, all explanations unnecessary. It would "leave the oarsmen [the either/or of debate over definitions and meanings] quiet." The boat is "built of stones that had lost their weight" and are "no longer heavy." The feeling of the weightless boat is conveyed mimetically by the long "as" clause which serves as an extended suspension.

As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable  
without any meaning,  
A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed  
sureness,  
That it contained the meaning into which he  
wanted to enter,  
A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the  
boat and leave the oarsmen quiet  
As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment,  
much or little,  
Removed from any shore, from any man or woman,  
and needing none. (*CP* 516)

The oarsmen's silence ("quiet") "creates a fresh universe out of nothingness." Suspended without adequate syntactic connectors for the word "as," we are literally "lured on by a syllable without any meaning." As John Hollander points out, Stevens often will try "emptying a sound of sense in order to refill it" (145).

In "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," a poem emotionally reminiscent of Vincent Van Gogh's late painting "Crows Over the Wheat Field," Stevens empties the universe, itself, in silent thought:

To think away the grass, the trees, the clouds,  
Not to transform them into other things,

Is only what the sun does every day,  
 He compares the appearance and disappearance of the sun's illuminating rays to thinking: "A daily majesty of meditation;/ That comes and goes in silences of its own" (CP 518). These "silences," the transitional parts of thought or "flights," according to William James' ideas in *The Principles of Psychology* (236), create a "transparency" (CP 518) of the universe which can then exist without transformation into words: "without his [man's] literature and without his gods..."(CP 518). Stevens' ellipsis after "gods," like a musical silence, marks the time of thought's ongoing beat. Frank Lentricchia's comments on the ellipsis in another Stevens' poem apply to this poem as well:

The ellipsis functions there similarly to how it functions here. This is not a moment in which words have been left out: it's a moment in which words do not exist for what Stevens is trying to signify; in which language disappears; and in which, somehow, one is experiencing unmediated, full presence - a contact outside discourse. ...The ellipses suggest a radically anti-literary impulse, a poetry of silence, where nothing will do but naked confrontation. (203)

I suggest further that the ellipses in Stevens' poems function as the transitive parts, "flights" of thinking which exist like the "moving part of a motion" (CP 518). Like night's non-visible sun which exists nonetheless, the transitive parts of thinking exist though they are not pinned down into words. Stevens, fascinated by these ineffable workings of thinking, likens them to "what we feel in what/ We hear, what we are, beyond mystic disputation," (CP 518).

We think, then, as the sun shines or does not.  
 We think as a wind skitters on a pond or in a field

Or we put mantles on our words because  
 The same wind, rising and rising, makes a sound  
 Like the last muting of winter as it ends. (*CP* 519)

In "Long and Sluggish Lines" (*CP* 522), Stevens signals the silence of the pre-conscious mind with an ellipsis:

...wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.  
 The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.  
 You were not born yet when the trees were crystal  
 Nor are you now, in their wakefulness inside a sleep.

Pre-linguistic, the ellipsis suggests the "pre-history" of the poem, the unvoiced thoughts that wander in the mind unarticulated.

As the epigraph to "The World as Meditation," Stevens quotes the composer Georges Enesco.

J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à  
 voyager. Mais l'exercice essentiel du compositeur--la  
 méditation--rien ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi...Je vis  
 un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour.

In juxtaposing violin practice and travel, Enesco found the two a perpetually ongoing meditative thinking process, a quest within a permanent dream which is life. Interestingly, the composer's meditative dream quest in the epigraph resonates, across the gap of blank space on the page (musical rest), with Penelope's somnolent, silent internal dialogue within the poem, itself. As Penelope wonders whether her long-absent husband will return, her thought, hovering between two possibilities (Ulysses' warmth or that of the sun), "beats" empty time like a conductor marking silent beats or bars of an orchestra's communal rest.

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

The two kept beating together. It was only day. (*CP* 521)

The sun's presence on Penelope's pillow alchemizes into memory of the absent Ulysses' bodily warmth. To Stevens, the Jamesian "full sunlit consciousness" would be so complete a melding between the self and the universe that one would no longer be perplexed nor need to maintain the self through a silent, internal dialogue.

"The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (*CP* 524) unifies the divided, dialoguing self. The conflicting thoughts of a contrapuntal mind become "a central mind":

...a dwelling in the evening air,  
In which being there together is enough.

The unity of self is the "intensest rendezvous." It is compared significantly to "a room/ In which we rest" (emphasis added). The effect of the internal dialogue's unification into a "whole,/ a knowledge" is silence, a quieting of the mind's constant buzzing thoughts. Significantly, the poem's stanzas provide room ("stanza" = "room" in Italian) for silence to be reconverted into space: "a dwelling in the evening air."

In "The Rock" however, Stevens first destroys such dwellings before reconceiving their possibility:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,  
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves  
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

He makes his own funeral arrangements.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.  
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.

In earlier poems, Stevens represents the mind's inner conversation as a musical duet. For him, the mind is its own accompaniment, existing in its perpetual self-asserting, problem-solving internal dialogue often represented as a voice accompanied by a guitar. In "The Rock," even this instrument is silenced:

...The sounds of the guitar  
Were not and are not. Absurd.

J. Hillis Miller points out that the word "absurd" comes from *ab + surdus*, meaning "deaf" (29). Death is deafness to, or the silencing of, one's internal dialogue, this manifestation of our "fantastic consciousness," our "queer assertion of humanity" (CP 525).

Burrows tells us, "silence is a death, because sound is movement and movement is an inalienable aspect of life" (22). Similarly in "The Rock," sound is life, and silence is death containing a "cure of the ground." Stevens' pun thrice turns on the "ground," as the earth which is our final resting place, the "absurd," untenable "assumption" that life will be negated into the "nothingness" of silence, and the musical basis (*ground bass*) containing a repetitive cycle of notes over which a theme with many variations may be played.

As if nothingness contained a métier,  
A vital assumption, an impermanence  
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high  
rock,...

Note that the inanimate rock becomes the base or "ground" upon which the animate "leaves" of the poem grow. Here, the vanished dwellings of the poem's first section are now conjured up

in spirit by "The Rock's" vague allusion to the Biblical passage about a wise man who builds his house upon a rock (*Luke 6.47-49*). Moreover, the passage also recalls Stevens' poetic alter-ego, Odysseus who, like the dormant "rock" of Stevens' poem, is asleep and covered with leaves when Nausicaa discovers him and solicits her parents to outfit him for his long-desired homeward journey.

The rock as "cure of the ground" equates a musical *ground bass* upon which many variations can be realized, with the cycles of the seasons within which infinite variations of life forms are produced.

...the poem makes meanings of the rock,  
Of such mixed motion and such imagery  
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

And so exists no more.

Paradoxically, the blank space provides silent time to meditate upon "a thousand things" that might render "barrenness" so fecund that it ceases to exist. A *ground bass* provides the measure and foundation and thus, "the rock is the stern particular of the [musical] air," "the gray particular of man's life." From dead silence, the poem shifts to a kind of tranquillity assumed only within a living mind:

It is the rock where tranquil must adduce  
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

Stevens' handiwork transforms the rock into "the main of things," thus punning on the French word for "hand" ("main"). Through "sleight-of-hand" ("leger-de-main"), he derives sound and thus, life, from a stone. "The stone from which he rises, up-and-ho" undergoes acoustical resurrection as it transposes into an *s-tone*, a

sound wave. Unable to conceive his own death, Stevens ultimately transforms the tombstone's silence into "Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep."

Hollander says of Stevens, "The silence, when it comes, is both acoustical--the silence of not being able to hear anything--and rhetorical--the silence of having nothing to utter" (143). Additionally, the silence is a confrontation with death, with not being able to say anything. Playing Russian roulette with the blank of silence is a courageous act on Stevens' part, "the ultimate lyric risk" (Vendler *Words* 15). Thus, the final lines of "The Rock" approach ultimate silence with a series of rambling, entropic, almost-senseless appositives, similar to a *fade-out* in popular music:

It is the rock where tranquil must adduce  
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end,  
That in which space itself is contained, the gate  
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,  
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,  
Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (*CP* 528)

In "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," Stevens, as outsider, finds that the ruined church contains nothing of value with which to deal pragmatically with death's "final seriousness." "St. Armorer's has nothing of this present" because it represents an outworn religion, useless to the needs of modern man. Language too, is compared to inadequate religion as Stevens struggles to find "a sacred syllable rising from sacked speech." This "rising" of

language to meet the "occasion" foreshadows the sunrise represented in his last poem in *The Rock* and of his *Collected Poems* as a whole. However, before the final sunrise of "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," Stevens first plays a "Note on Moonlight" (CP 531), disrupting the silence of death and of dead "sacked" language with "fresh" minted speech: "Night and silence disturbed by an interior sound" (CP 532). If he begins to turn a deaf ear to the notion of meaningless silence, does Stevens consequently think also that the universe may not be purposeless, "absurd," though the creator is silent? The ellipsis at the poem's conclusion is Stevens' way of orchestrating ambiguity.

The one moonlight, the various universe--intended  
 So much just to be seen--a purpose, empty  
 Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,  
 Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for sure...

The pregnant silence of the poem's final ellipsis cryptically suggests that death's silence may be merely a gestational pause.

Overall, conceived of as stone deafness, the silence which dominates much of the volume of *The Rock* expresses the anguish that the aging Stevens must have felt over his body's inevitable betrayal. He might have found a parallel to these feelings in the torment Beethoven felt as he was losing his hearing. Stevens admired Beethoven's music: "Beethoven is my meat" (LWS 604), and his record collection contained numerous recordings of the composer's works. Tellingly, Stevens' conception of himself as the "lion in the lute facing the lion locked in stone" (LWS 790) resonates with a popular contemporary Beethoven biography (1937) which describes the emotional pain of the deaf composer in

a chapter entitled "Le Grand Sourd" with a subsection bearing the title "The Rift in the Lute."<sup>6</sup> The biography quotes Beethoven's famous letter dated June 1, 1801 to his friend, pastor Carl Amenda:

...your Beethoven is very unhappily, in constant conflict with nature and his Creator; oftentimes I have cursed the latter for making his creatures the sport of the most terrible chance, so that often the most beautiful blossoming is thereby destroyed and crushed; know then that my noblest faculty, my hearing, has sadly deteriorated. ...and the most beautiful years of my life will take wings without accomplishing all the promise of my talent and powers!<sup>7</sup>

For Stevens, for whom the imagination played such an important role, to imagine death was the ultimate imaginative act, the supreme act of courage. The poems of *The Rock* are a sound rehearsal similar to the way a skier practices the run in his mind before going downhill. But in Stevens' poetry, "After the final no there comes a yes" (CP 247). Eventually, silence dissolves his corporeal form intersubjectively into:

A reader of the text,  
A reader without a body,  
Who reads quietly: (CP 503)

In "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," winter and darkness are equated with soundless gestation. This poem moves from *The Rock's* abrasions of sound, its erasure of language into deathlike silence, to recuperate an originary pre-linguistic

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<sup>6</sup>Derived from Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, "Merlin and Vivien": "It is the rift within the lute,/ That by and by will make the music mute,/And ever widening slowly silence all."

<sup>7</sup>Beethoven quoted by Robert Haven Schauffler, *Beethoven: The Man Who Freed Music*, (Garden City, New York: 1937) 85.

experience. Both the sunrise and the onset of spring sound as the amusical inarticulate "cry" of new life.

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

The poem begins, to use T.S. Eliot's phrase, as "a raid on the inarticulate," or the Stevensian "cry of its occasion," penetrating the silence of sleep.

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

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

Stevens comes to a synaesthetic "new knowledge of reality," breaking the sound barrier by hearing a sunrise. His "choral rings" seem to emerge from Emerson's ever-widening circles of knowledge and resonate with Fenollosa's Emersonian-infused, description of poetic language, itself, in which each word is "like a sun, with its corona and chromosphere; words crowd upon words, and enwrap each other in their luminous envelopes until sentences become clear, continuous light bands."<sup>8</sup>

Stevens' "imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" had "something to do with ... self-preservation" (NA 36) and with "writing as an act of keeping alive" (Poirier 111). In "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," Stevens performs a

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<sup>8</sup>Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," ed. Ezra Pound (1920; reprint San Francisco, n.d.) 22f.

twentieth-century rendition of Whitman's assertion in *Song of Myself* (213):

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise  
would kill me,  
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me

Informed by William James, Stevens' version makes music serve as the paradigm for dawning consciousness and equates musical silence with sleep. Consciousness of self upon waking is orchestrated for the sun's "c," both musical pitch and picture of the sun as it rims the morning horizon, conjuring up Strauss's musical depiction of the dawn in *Thus Spake Zarathustra's* opening measures. Stevens' poem resonates with William James' idea in *The Principles of Psychology*. James points out that:

On waking from sleep, we usually know that we have been unconscious, and we often have an accurate judgment of how long. ...the consciousness is, *for itself*, not what it was in the former case, but interrupted and discontinuous, in the mere time-sense of the words. But in the other sense of continuity, the sense of the parts being inwardly connected and belonging together because they are parts of a common whole, the consciousness remains sensibly continuous and one. What now is the common whole? The natural name for it is *myself, I, or me*. (*Prin. Psych.* 232)

Cleverly, Stevens compares consciousness to a melody, and sleep (and perhaps death) to a musical rest that is a meaningful and integral part of the music itself. For him, a musical silence/rest may very well represent the part of consciousness that recognizes a gap while continuing to exist as the Jamesian "community of self" which "the time-gap [of sleep] cannot break in twain" (232).

After *The Rock's* many silences, the "earliest ending of winter" appears as a state of heightened acoustical awareness: earliest nerve endings.<sup>9</sup> The "scrawny cry from outside [which]/ Seemed like a sound in his mind" homonymically seams the outside to the inside so that these distinctions cease to exist, and one need not complain as does "The Man with the Blue Guitar": "I cannot bring the world quite round,/ Although I patch it as I can" (*CP* 165). The third stanza of "Not Ideas about the Thing" further knits self and universe since what "would have been outside," no longer is.

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

The ellipsis after snow allows for time to hear "know" embedded in "snow," resonating most notably with an early poem, "The Snowman." For Stevens, "one poem proves another and the whole" (*CP* 441). Accordingly, this poem cadences *The Collected Poems* with a chord resolving all the rest. The phrase "battered panache" contains the possibility of fresh language since the sun's *C* above the snow is no longer "battered" like a defaced surface of type (*OED* 1005), but appears as a feather plume ("panache"), a potential writing quill. Heightened awareness becomes an "ending" to the poet's sentiment that he is controlled by language, that the world speaks the somnambulant subject.

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

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<sup>9</sup>As a parent, Stevens must have noticed what linguists such as Noam Chomsky have remarked upon, that children, using an innate grammar logic, will form funny superlatives like "terriblest"--i.e. "The mind is the terriblest force in the world, father" (*CP* 436).

Struck dumb through the enlightening ellipses, the specified subject (inferred as a separate human from "his mind") metamorphoses into a generalized "it," the referent of which becomes so nebulous that it truly does meld with all nature. Unlike Crispin whose ambitions were "clipped" like a newspaper, the poet, here, finds that his voice is no longer the fragmentary one of old newspapers chopped into "papier-mâché," but that of all nature.

It was part of the colossal sun,  
Surrounded by its choral rings,  
Still far away. It was like  
A new knowledge of reality.

The chorister's *C*, as the constant speed of light in Einstein's famous equation, underscores Stevens' relativistic orchestration of the sight of a sunrise as sound:

...sound itself, pure sound, is a sort of creation.  
Nature has only noises. (Valéry *Dialogues* 100)

By ending this poem on the note *C* which sounds frequently throughout his *Collected Poems*, Stevens puns on this pivotal tone as the "see" of sight and the "sea" which provides the medium for life's beginning. He breaks sleep/death's silence in an optimistic key *C*, as the "certain and ever more fresh" (*CP* 531) religious "see" of a pragmatism that views seeing and hearing the universe as our reason for being.

In his earlier poems, Stevens had used inanimate natural objects as orchestrations for his emerging poetic voice as "the lion in the lute/ before the lion locked in stone" (*CP* 175). Punning, he had even scored incipient music for this beast-on-the-border as

"the well-tempered apricot" (*CP* 253), taming the well-tuned "ape" within orthographic confines. Though these poems evidenced Stevens' "delicatest inner ear" wherein "roses tinkle" and "crinkled paper" sounds "brilliant" (*CP* 252), they tended to impose an orchestration on the elements of the earth, e.g. "Thunder by the Musician" (*CP* 220) or the acoustical description on the "sun" as "horn," which synaesthetically transposes the glaring sun into a blaring horn (*CP* 269).

In the later poems, so dominated by silence, Stevens prepares for a Whitmanian fusion with the earth: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love" (Whitman 247). No longer the clumsy "Peter Quince" struggling with the "clavier" or the equally inept "Crispin" attempting to write "the book of moonlight," Stevens is now the accomplished master. He achieves the perfection of the master musician's fusion with his instrument, betokening the mystic's union with the universe, by playing "A Note on Moonlight" (*CP* 531). Just as the orchestrator delineates shifts in thought by using the "colors" of appropriate instruments, so too, Stevens describes his cosmic mental shift as "a change of color in the plain poet's mind." In his final volume of poetry, he consummates his spirit's synaesthetic quest:

To find of sound the bleakest ancestor,  
To find of light a music issuing

Whereon it falls in more than sensual mode. (*CP* 398)

This "more than sensual mode" causes us, as performers of Stevens' poems, to breathe as an ensemble would and to feel a consequent spiritual connection. For Stevens, silence becomes "the

expanded signature of genius" which "extend[s] even beyond the volume itself" (Mallarmé 41). His carefully orchestrated silences provide space for the transitions of thinking. Much like the rests in symphonic music, they are important places to prepare for the phrases that follow. One may mentally "retake the bow" or renegotiate the gap between words during his orchestrated ellipses and dashes.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:  
The access of perfection to the page. (CP 358)

If, as William James says, "the breach from one mind to another is perhaps the greatest breach in nature" (*Prin. Psych.* 231), Stevens uses rests to make us feel a community of spirit in the process of thinking, itself. By requiring us to think and breathe during certain breaches (pauses, dashes, ellipses), he orchestrates a communion of the breath in which we partake of his continuing poetic spirit:

...and he breathed  
The breath of another Nature as his own, (CP 513)

We are forced through Stevens' carefully orchestrated passages to "live beyond ourselves in air" (CP 518). In *The Rock*, he makes of silence the ultimate harmony:

...this indispensable radical harmony will not escape the spirit kindled at that centre: what indeed is this spirit but that very harmony raised to an actual unity, to a conscious motion and warmth and music coursing between the soul and the world?<sup>10</sup>

Breathing and thinking through Stevens' poetic pauses relate us as human beings to each other. Finally, "orchestrally," we breathe as

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<sup>10</sup>George Santayana, "Harmony" in *The Birth of Reason and Other Essays*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) 73.

one body. No wonder, then, that Stevens calls "the final relation, the marriage of the rest" (CP 465).

Volume	Silence	Silences	Silent	Silently	Total pages in volume	Number of poems in volume	Word use of silence or variants
<i>Harmonium</i>	3	0	4	0	100	85	7
<i>Ideas of Order</i>	1	1	0	0	45	36	2
<i>Blue Guitar</i>	0	0	0	0	23	3	0
<i>Parts of a World</i>	4	1	1	0	90	63	6
<i>Transport to Summer</i>	5	1	3	1	123	57	10
<i>Auroras of Autumn</i>	3	0	1	1	86	32	5
<i>The Rock</i>	5	1	1	0	33	25	7

## IX. Coda: "Transcendent Analogue"

Words are the only melodeon.  
(Wallace Stevens *OP* 196)

Sophisticated in his knowledge of music, Wallace Stevens drew upon its emotive power to convey, as if by direct transfusion, strong feelings in his poetry. According to Anthony Storr in *Music and the Mind*, "Music brings about similar physical responses in different people at the same time" (24). Storr contends that "there is a closer relation between *hearing* and emotional arousal than there is between *seeing* and emotional arousal" (26). Conceiving of music as a "transcendent analogue" (*NA* 130), Stevens utilized techniques of orchestration to effect "a condition of heightened alertness, awareness, interest, and excitement" (Storr 24), thereby bringing about a desired transference between poet and reader:

The poet seems to confer his identity on the reader. It is easiest to recognize this when listening to music - I mean this sort of thing: the transference. (*OP* 185)

Charting his spirit's progress, the volume of Stevens' *Collected Poems* is like a sound journal in search of:

The essential poem at the center of things,  
The arias that spiritual fiddlings make, (*CP* 440)

Aligning himself with Emerson ("I embrace the common..."),<sup>1</sup> Stevens was always struggling for this commonality: "I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central" (*LWS* 352).

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<sup>1</sup>"The American Scholar," *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 68.

Stevens commented, "I write poetry to formulate my ideas and to relate myself to the world" (*LWS* 306). His emphasis on the relational aspect of language resonates with ideas of William James, who advocated capturing the subtle nuances of, what Stevens would call, "the colors of the mind" through the evocative feelings of a language of relation:

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. ...All *dumb* or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts 'about' this object or 'about' that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound. (*Prin. Psych* 238-239)

Because many aspects of music are relational, they serve as the perfect paradigm for the intangibles of thought and feeling. "Crescendo" is a much misused musical term borrowed by laymen who err in saying that "the emotions reached a *crescendo*," failing to understand that this term and others in music exist as relational processes of performance, not static points of arrival. Stevens understood instinctively that a poem works in the manner of the relational instructions of music performance: *crescendo*, *rallentando*, *accelerando*, and the like.

It is the huge, high harmony that sounds  
A little and a little, suddenly,  
By means of a separate sense. It is and it  
Is not, and therefore is. In the instant of speech,  
The breath of an *accelerando* moves,  
Captives the being, widens - and was there. (*CP* 440)

Often, the conceptual orchestrations of a Stevens poem make the reader hover like a hummingbird in a delightful state of suspended thought.

Abstracting the possibility of an enduring nobler self, Stevens claimed, "the good man has no shape" (*CP* 364). This notion is musical. Because a melody exists as a set of intervallic *relationships*, it can function in any key. Transposition cannot alter its integrity. Similarly, Stevens' "central man"/"good man" exists in right relation to his world, in any time, place, or form.

Through centuries he lived in poverty.  
God was his only elegance.

Then generation by generation he grew  
Stronger and freer, a little better off.

He lived each life because, if it was bad,  
He said a good life would be possible.

There are few recordings of Stevens reading his own poetry. Part of the explanation for this, by his own account, is that he "disliked the idea of records" of poetry (*LWS* 765-66) and felt ill at ease doing public readings. Additionally, he felt that the "music of verse" (*LWS* 388), if unattached to a particular voice, would serve as an algebra of the spirit. He wanted the reader to become a function of the poetic equation. Stevens commented, "I sit down every evening after dinner and, after a little music [radio or record player], put my forefinger in the middle of my forehead and struggle with my imagination" (*LWS* 273). He felt that it was the duty of the poet to make his imagination that of his readers.

I think that his function is to make his imagination  
theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his  
imagination become the light in the minds of others.

His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives.  
(NA 29)

The cumulative effect of Stevens' techniques of orchestration transforms the reader into an active performer of his poetic score. Stevens often translated:

...a spatial object into a temporal event. The world presented itself to him in visual terms; and yet poetry turned the visual object into the temporal integration, into that musical score for experience that we call a poem. (Vendler, *Words* 7)

Moreover, Stevens often transformed the temporal back into a spatial realm as in the phrase from "The Man with the Blue Guitar": "The tune is space" (*CP* 168), or in his statement: "A journey in space equals a journey in time" (*OP* 188). Treating his perplexing abstract poems as "musical score[s]" facilitates their interpretation.

And yet, the unusual orchestrations in Stevens' poems problematize the role of the reader, often sending him on a musical scavenger hunt: "the poem must resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully" (*CP* 350). Tapping into the intuitive "sense in sounds beyond their meaning" (*CP* 352), Stevens' poems resist the rational, causing his "invisible audience" (*CP* 240) to "quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything" (*CP* 16), and to scrutinize, discard, reevaluate, and re-imagine the order of life as fluid, musical improvisation. These poems, rather than silent, static, artistic objects to be read and admired, constitute a "musical score," a guide to our own active performance, imbued with balance and harmony. Stevens' poetic scorings direct us to fulfill our function, to sing or "play a tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (*CP* 165).

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