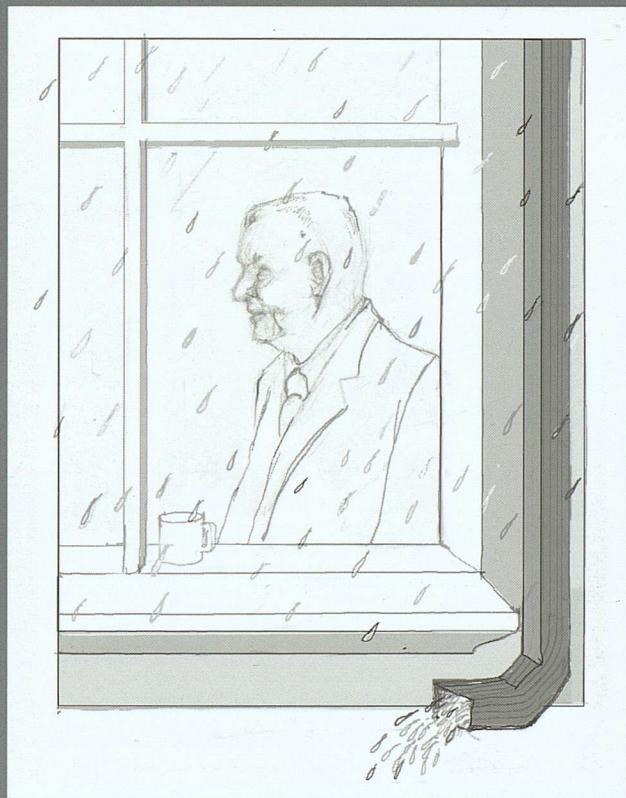


The Wallace Stevens Journal



Special Issue

Wallace Stevens and "The Less Legible Meanings of Sounds"

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Wallace Stevens and
"The Less Legible Meanings of Sounds"
Edited by Natalie Gerber

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Karhryn Jacobi

The Tink-tonk of the Rain

from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," XIV

The Wallace Stevens Journal

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The “Final Finding of the Ear”: Wallace Stevens’ Modernist Soundscapes

PETER MIDDLETON

ORIGINS

THE POEM, SAYS Wallace Stevens in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning.”¹ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” itself is a poem that presents truth, knowledge, myth, and fantasy as no more nor less than the vicissitudes of belief in all its forms. No reality independent of subjectivity is available as a measure of truth and fact, no “external rational constraints on thinking” (76), as John McDowell calls them in his philosophical study *Mind and World*, and therefore belief in the possibility of an “immaculate” (perfect, clean, pure, ideal) origin must presumably be just another fiction, albeit a persuasive one. By the poem’s own logic, this or any poem that “satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning” cannot be a *fact* or, as a philosopher would say, a “justified true belief”; there are no facts, no true beliefs, only fictions, and so there may not be any immaculate beginnings except in the imagination. Although Stevens has linked “the first idea” with “immaculate beginning” rather than more mundane beginnings such as that of the poem, he has still raised the stakes for his own enterprise, so that the question—how then should the poet begin a poem that questions its own propositions in this way—becomes a powerful tacit concern for writer and reader.

Modernist poets and philosophers find beginnings difficult. They begin without beginning by starting with an “and,” or they fold the beginning back on itself in meta-discursive questionings that eventually become the entirety of the work. From *A la recherche du temps perdu* to *Waiting For Godot*, and “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” to T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* or H. D.’s *Trilogy*, beginnings become so absorbing they develop into *peripateia* and even into endings (as in Eliot’s poem). Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* begins *in media res* as if unable to escape the prolonged bewitchments of Homer’s Odyssean narrative, recounting the wandering protagonist’s retreat from Circe’s island, and simultaneously indicating that this is a narrative with a material history whose waning power is manifest as textual anachronism and unstable poetic discourse. Intermittent use of poetic abbreviations,

for instance, opens a modernist rift in what could have been merely a re-enactment of Homer: the preposition "over" is immediately spelled in an anachronistic manner consonant with the poetic diction of earlier centuries (Stevens may even be alluding to these lines in the opening of his poem, since he also refers to the "slumber" of the sun):

Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day's end.
Sun to his slumber, shadows o'er all the ocean. . . . (7)

The two versions of "over" not only correspond to metrical demands, they measure the changing sound of modernity. As the *Cantos* unfold, the sound of words will often be a key to what they signify, and may involve odd spelling, special metrical effects, disappearances behind ideograms, or distortions of bibliographic codes incurred by spatial arrangements on the page. The sound of the poem's languages will come to seem a determinant of the poem's meanings as significant as the historical and literary source texts to which so many lines allude.

Modernist philosophers from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Martin Heidegger and Stanley Cavell also find themselves enmeshed in openings. Jacques Derrida begins his essay on the conflict between sound and sight over control of the sign, *Of Grammatology*, as he does so many of his works, by reflecting on the difficulty of finding a place to begin, or as he calls it in this instance, providing an "exergue." The problem is that the science of writing he wants to embark upon cannot be written because to be scientific is to be "nonphonetic" (3), that is to suppress the sound of language by using logical symbolism, whereas the domain of enquiry, writing, is generally assumed to be fundamentally phonic because it is assumed to be the secondary projection of the sounding of thought and reason in speech (this assumption is what will be "deconstructed" by Derrida). Where can he begin then? The future of writing in an age of science is so elusive to representation that no imaginable starting point could suffice: "For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue" (5). Beginnings raise difficult questions about foundations, history, subjectivity, and sometimes surprisingly, as in the cases of Pound and Derrida, about sound. Resolving the significance of the sound of language may be necessary to open the modernist agenda. The difference between the acoustic of "o'er" and "over" matters to modernist belief, even though reason explains (in words in a language dependent on sound) that the sound of the words has no semantic significance. Why then do these modernists think it so significant for a better understanding of modernity to recognize the import of linguistic aurality, and that adequate investigation of this has not yet properly begun?

Stevens meets the challenge of beginning "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" by employing both strategies at once, throwing us into the world

of the poem without warning and making the question of *nativity* (to borrow a term from Hannah Arendt [178]) its thematic preoccupation:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun. (329)

Like a master of ceremonies or, to follow the line of the rhetoric, like an instructor facing a pupil, the poem begins by the simple expedient of commanding a start: "Begin, ephebe." This is not the immaculate beginning it seems. This is a moment similar to the opening of the first canto because "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" assumes that everything is already underway or in place, and all that is needed is for the anticipated reader/listener to start his or her responsive activity. We are already in the gymnasium awaiting instruction from a speaker who will be ready to deliver it, just as Pound's wayfarers are waiting for the poem to launch the boat and begin their voyage of escape from captivity. Pound's voyagers are fleeing Circe's delusory enchantments; Stevens' novice will be guided away from illusory beliefs about the world. Instruction takes the form of an injunction to readers that also interpellates us as beginners, or ephebes, and, as so often in his poetry, the unusual lexicon, in this case the word "ephebe," creates a semantic fuzziness that enables the poem to both affirm the semantic meaning—the Greek idea of the young man training in the gymnasium for the tasks of the adult citizen—and to leave a lexical space with an aura of strangeness that the poetic context can at least partially fill with its own adumbrated meanings. Yet this is not only a continuation of a narrative that extends back as in Pound's opening. His canto could start without us as it were, whereas Stevens' poem appears to have been waiting for us to arrive, as if the poem can only begin because we inaugurate its beginning, a reflexivity that points to a series of attempted acoustic exergues that increasingly delay the poem from setting out anywhere. Exploring why the poem needs the reader to begin with sound will take this essay into considerations of Stevens' prosody, the cultural history of sound, and to a utopian sounding of modernity.

On the face of it, the reader is asked to take a first step by noticing that what we call the real world is a construction of myths and concepts that we project onto a universe we cannot know directly by perception (philosophers call the idea that we do have direct knowledge of things through perception "the myth of the given"). The poem uses as its example the long history of changing perceptions of the sun in myth, religion, and science. Stevens might have in mind William Blake's reversal of common sense when he said he saw the sun as a chorus of angels rather than a ball of fiery light. Beneath the surface of what reads as if it were philosophical instruction in a form of phenomenological reduction, however, is an accompanying narrative of phonic transformations, "less legible meanings

of sounds" (416) based initially on reflexive use of the two vowels of the word "begin." This reflexive sonic opening reveals itself to be as involuted as Derrida's impossible exergue once we notice how the argument handles the sequence of variations on the sounds of the embedded phonemes. The phonetic sequence ceases to be merely the audible vehicle of semantic effects, and we have an almost pataphysical discourse comprising letters used as phonetic signs comparable to mathematical symbols: "The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement" (417).

Language in everyday discourse has the capacity to refer to itself, so that speakers can offer correctives to misunderstanding and make explicit their intentions in situations where ambiguity might flourish, a linguistic feature of increasing interest to modernists throughout the past century. Gertrude Stein was one of the great exponents of this capacity. Stevens makes use of this self-referential capacity for utterances to correct and question themselves in many ways, usually semantic, but here he does something strikingly original by creating points of local self-reference to phonemes in the poem, to their sounds and then to possible semantic values detached from the syntax of the containing sentence. Read from this perspective, overlaid on the borrowed phenomenology is a sonic argument in the form of acoustic images through which equivalences and transformations based on sound values unfold as if they were extended equations in poetic form. This effect is hard to describe, though based on a familiar feature of the history of poetry: the repetition of a specific vowel sound or phoneme across lines and stanzas generates internal "rhyming"²² that then creates spatial organizations for the eye (and temporal connections for the ear) that produce their own equivalences of words with different semantic values, instigating connections that may not be explicit (or even implicit) in the semantic organization of the syntax and propositional forms of the sentence. Stevens exploits this infrastructural practice more than most by offering a libretto of strong reasoning, and by locating key phonemes at points where their musical phrasing could be considered as the subjects of propositions.

His predecessors knowingly created internal rhymes that set up tiered meanings in the form of expectations, actions, and images that counter the incremental word-by-word linear unfolding of the poem, but Stevens goes further. He attempts to cross the barrier between semantic meaning and the sounds of the words of the poem. We are all familiar with how this can happen in a song, where the notes can seem to carry the meanings of certain words in the lyric, and the words become "musicalized" as it were (though musicologists argue about just how this happens and what it signifies for the aesthetic [Nicholls 2007]). Stevens does some of his most striking work in this first section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" with the internal sounds of the word "begin." Although it is made up of two syllables, *be* /bi/ and *gin* /gɪn/, the second syllable has a subcomponent *in* /ɪn/ that has almost as strong a semantic recognition as *be*. These

entities *be* and *in* that bookend the velar /g/ both carry familiar semantic values as well as most of the stress placed on the sequence of letters. If we think of *begin* in this manner as made up of two dominant components and the hinge of the velar /g/, the first thing that emerges to view is that the young man is identified with the opening syllable *be* through the three repetitions of the vowel in the words used to identify him, *begin ephebe*, just as musical notes and phrases are sometimes associated with specific characters in opera. The first three words almost say "Begin, ephebe, *be*" because the eye first sees the *b* (a letter with identical pronunciation to *be*) that starts the third word *by*, and then the reader goes through a liminal process of hearing the injunction "be" (exist, be yourself, be present), and then replacing it with the /aɪ/ sound as a slightly dissonant note in place of the expected /i/. This falling away from a hinted-at *be* suggests that the ephebe (and the reader who is compelled by the vocative address to identify with this beginner) does not yet quite know *how to be*. This effect is reinforced by the stuttering character of the word "ephebe," in which an almost audible further repetition produces the missing verb *be*.

Now the other phoneme, /n/, comes into play. This alveolar nasal and its close relation, the velar nasal /ŋ/, associate the key words in the first line: "perceiving" and "begin." These words display the high front vowel phonemes /i/ and /ɪ/. The first is connected with the action of perceiving or noticing. The second is connected both with the visual occurrence of *in* in "perceiving" (where the graphemic sequence *in* resembles the phonemic sequence /ɪŋ/), and with the *in* (or /ɪn/) that forms the prefix of "invention," "inverted," and "inconceivable." It also elicits attention to transformations of sound. The sound of the word "begin" is transformed into the sound of the phrase "the sun," so that the sharpness of the opening vowels /i/ and /ɪ/ is muted to the softness of /ə/ and /ʌ/, while the hardness of the /g/ becomes the light consonant /s/. From here a series of complex internal full and partial rhymes on the word "sun"—"man," "seen," "one"—and on "ephebe"—"Phoebus," "expelled us," "cleanliness"—and then more elaborate echoes of the /ʌ/ of "sun"—"umber," "slumber," "autumn," "flourisher," and "Must" (329–30), lead us toward two climaxes. First is the death of Phoebus, which is also the death or silencing of an aspect of the phonetic resonances of the word "ephebe." The "us" associated with "be" is erased. Then comes the final stanza:

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be. (330)

By repeating the phrase "the sun" twice, the poem makes use of the familiar effect of repetition to retune cognitive attention to the material words themselves away from their meaning, and the mind hears momentarily that the project for "the sun" is to become just the words "the sun."

The concluding clause of the final sentence folds everything back to the start of the whole section by repeating the first and last syllables, /bi/ and /in/, without the intervening consonant across the enjambment, so that *the sun* now “bear[s] no name” and can be indicated only by the sounds of the opening word, *begin*. Then the remaining syllables of the final line invert the order of the two syllables, /bi/ and /in/, as if to indicate by this reversal that there is a residual difficulty of (knowing, thinking, understanding) what it is both “to be,” that is to exist, and to be an ephebe, to be there to start the poem. We are caught in the difficulty of that opening word, now broken in two and inverted so that we end on the same syllable with which we started, as if we have still not begun.

Sound symbolism in poetry often shades away from the obvious to the “ghostlier demarcations” (106) of ever-receding harmonics of significant sense, and Stevens is a master of the game of tantalizing the reader with increasingly attenuated traces of symbolism. The demarcations of “begin” that I have discerned are likely to be, for the reader, adumbrations rather than spotlit saliences in awareness. No wonder many critics find it simpler to allude to the musicality of the whole poem. The temptation to set aside such possibilities of meaning and call the overall poetic effect musicality is something that Stevens’ poems work with, as he plays on a reader’s uncertainty about the semantic significance of such sound matrices at the “bluntest barriers” (343), as he does with the semantic roominess created by words such as “ephebe” and “Phoebus.” This use of reflexivity to create a series of almost mathematical transformations of the acoustic image occurs throughout “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” though usually on a less extended scale. The first and second sections of “It Must Change” pick up the ontological implications of the verb *be* by introducing a scene of the “birds and the bees” in a flowery landscape watched over by an anachronistic angel, in which the pun on “bee” and “be” is at first submerged in favor of the celebration of this cloyingly sentimental poetic trope, which then loses conviction in the final three stanzas (“the distaste we feel for this withered scene” [337]).

One response to these ambivalences would be to try to fix the best elements of the opening pastoral scene. A stylized figure, “the President,” therefore, “ordains the bee to be / Immortal” (337), and we hear echoes of the opening of the previous section in this demand that pun be made literal and permanent truth. Bad puns are cleverly used by Stevens to reflect on those associated with them, as if such crude uses of verbal sound to create semantic equivalences were a sign of delusory ideology. Homonymic play on “chord” and “cord” works to belittle Christian myth by association with the crude art of the pun—“A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell” (346). The failure of the President’s strategy of governing the world is made especially evident in his wish that the curtains be adjusted “to a metaphysical t” (337). Playing off the idiom “done to a t” by adding the apparently unnecessary adjective cleverly exposes the absur-

dity of the desire embodied by the President to make letters carry metaphysical significance. Yet sound, even the sound of the letter *t*, does carry great potential of some kind, possibly metaphysical, as the final line of this section implicitly suggests: “this / Booming and booming of the new-come bee” (338). Does “being” also “boom,” does the world of being, the world of to “be,” also manifest itself through the sound of even a syllable such as /bi/? Other passages seem to suggest so. The otherwise disconcerting account of the “mystic marriage in Catawba” (346) in section IV of “It Must Give Pleasure” depends on the degree to which the “marriage-place” (347) that Bawda and the captain loved was called Catawba, which is a sonic merger of the words “captain” and “Bawda,” and the semantic context leaves no doubt that this is an Edenic condition. What is striking is that the achievement of this utopian prospect should be projected partly through phonetic effects.

The most obvious poetic strategy to foreground the phonetic dimension of syllables and words is manifest in Stevens’ relatively unusual preoccupation with nonsense syllables that are usually onomatopoetic and often neologisms. The Arabian’s “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,” the wood-dove’s “hoobla-hoo,” the ocean’s “hoo” (331), the birds singing “Ké-ké” (340), and the cymbals ringing with “shoo-shoo-shoo” (347) are typical of a practice that extends across his poetry. These cries manifest passionate expressivity that does not enter the linguistic “logical space of reasons,” and yet does participate in the intensive sound patterning.³ The Arabian’s cry climaxes a sequence that begins with the sea, proceeds in a more complex way in the bird song, and then hovers on the borderline of sense with its final syllable *how*. Not all the nonsense words are so intrusively obvious. Some of the phatic cries are such familiar poetic devices, the “O,” “Oh,” and “Ah” from a long poetic tradition, that they are often almost invisible to a reader who is likely to hear them as no more than prosodic fillers.

The interdependence of two different modes of generating meaningfulness, discursive reasoning and the complex encoding of phonemes, which constitutes the full significance of the opening section, sets the pace for the rest of the poem and gives the reader a first insight into the modernist dilemmas that arise from questions about the authority of writing, the nature of knowledge and being, and the role of language that trouble Stevens. Why then does Stevens opt for a textual strategy that relies so heavily on phonetic sound to decouple assertoric force and textual logic? Is he for instance trying to manifest the surfaces of discourse and deconstruct the hierarchies of writing and speech, or are there other histories of sound and language that create this imperative for him? Anca Rosu in her study of sound in Stevens attempts to reconcile these alternatives in her suggestion that Stevens aims to discredit “traditional oppositions between sound and sense” by working with sound “to dissolve a certain epistemological order traditionally associated with poetic representation while summoning into existence another—the unrepresented, the (otherwise)

unrepresentable—in its place” (71). At the close of a discussion of the “Comedian as the Letter C,” she argues that “eventually all requirements of narrative are fulfilled by its quasi-musical patterns” (135). These are helpful insights into Stevens’ ambitions, though I think they overestimate his success at evoking the unrepresentable, and too readily assimilate him to the poststructuralist reading of modernist representation. Expressiveness is deeply important to Stevens, and he is aware of the limits of the concept of representation. We should look in Stevens for the ways in which sound patterning not only adds an additional cognitive layer but also alludes to the histories that may be audible there too. Intimations set loose by holding the reader’s attention to the sound of the first word “begin” will turn out to be more important than any proposition offered by this section of the poem, and yet it will not be evident that the poem itself quite realizes why this should be so, other than as a sign that the value of poetry as manifest in its beautiful sound can remain strong even in time of war.

PARTICULARS

Stevens always celebrated sound in his poetry. Sound is a sign of vitality, a manifestation of energy, whether of activity, thought, or feeling, so that he can describe the entire universe in almost Pythagorean terms as “The complicate, the amassing harmony” (348). The music of his phrasing, the choice of sound and music as themes in many poems, the innumerable passing allusions to the noise made by creatures and objects of all kinds, his notorious nonsense syllables—all show him reveling in the energies manifest as the sounds of life. Expressivity requires sound. “The poem is the cry of its occasion” (404), he writes, assuming that an “occasion” would normally manifest itself as an involuntary expressive sound. “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” concludes that “The less legible meanings of sounds” are “the edgings and inchings of final form, / The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement” (416–17), and these sounds matter because “reality” is not a “solid” so much as “a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (417). Such deliquescent, elusive states of the world reveal themselves in sounds at the edge of language that may not be immediately functional and exact phonemes.

The entire development of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” depends on associations with sound and its many forms, especially music and voice, and the cosmos is repeatedly imagined in acoustic terms. Part IV of “It Must Be Abstract” deliberately blurs images of cloud, pedagogue, coulisse, bare board, and rose in a vast Turner-esque void, where

Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips
Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them. (332)

The universe is as much constructed of sound as of light, and this noise and music provide the seeds from which human perceptions and ideas grow.

The obvious pun on “Abysmal” (meaning belonging to the sublime abyss, or poorly played) and the more tacit visual pun on pips (pips as in the seed of a fruit or the signal from a telephone, plus a visual echo of the expected word *pipes* that could belong to a mighty instrument of the abyss such as an organ) also indicate an instability of value here. William Empson’s discussion of “wit” in Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” notes a repeated “ominous idea that the lowest is an exact parallel of the highest” (97), a connection that can also be found in Stevens.⁴ Empson argues that such ominous equivalences show that for Pope, “The contradictions of his self-contempt and self-justification are erected into a solid and intelligent humility before the triumphs and social usefulness possible to his art” (97). Similar tensions are evident in Stevens, who is less confident about the cultural successes of poetic art, though they are constellated around the myriad valuations and associations attached to sound as a modern form of “wit.”

Later in this first section, Stevens hints at the difficulties of comprehending the world as sound when “MacCullough” is glimpsed by the sea, “lounging,” then worryingly “Drowned,” and then “reading in the sound” (334–35) in a process that leads to some sort of epiphany:

As if the waves at last were never broken,
As if the language suddenly, with ease,
Said things it had laboriously spoken. (335)

The next section is dismissive of such “romantic intoning” (evoking the pantheistic and spiritual aspirations of romanticism through an image of the religious chanting of a psalm or prayer), even if it is better than “reason’s click-clack” (335) (evoking the sounds of a machine such as a typewriter or an adding machine, both familiar in an insurance office), an argument relying closely on two evaluations of sound both of which are normally pejorative, though the second more so than the first. “It Must Give Pleasure” begins with a rejection of a certain kind of *communitas* based on joyful celebratory singing, music and speech, that tacitly assumes that these sounds can be metonymic of society enacting rituals of self-formation. Canon Aspirin, in his attempt to comprehend the universe, is aware that although the night may be “far underneath” his sight, it is “audible in the mountain of / His ear, the very material of his mind” (348), and as he lets his thoughts expand outward he feels able to grasp “The complicate, the amassing harmony” that is the world, a world manifest as sound. The poem is ambivalent about Aspirin’s achievement, continuing on in the next section to contrast his actual achievement with a hypothetical receptivity to the world that enables a person “To find the real” (349), and this means, at least for the angel, something paradoxical:

Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound. (349)

It is not atoms known through their radiating light that comprise this universe; this is a universe constructed from a vast aggregation of sounds audible when the mind is receptively silent, presumably because it is not cogitating. If we want to understand (to be absorbed by the proper fiction of) the material, actual world in which we are embedded, we must listen to its melody as much as or more than we gaze at its visible yet nebulous shapes. When the poem begins to work to a close and the narrator becomes self-conscious and slightly self-mocking (saying for instance that he enjoys "Enjoying angels" (350), where the repetition of "enjoy" lends a certain silliness to the admission), it is ordinary birdsong, that staple of poetry (and aesthetic philosophy), that brings him back to earth. Birdsong is repetitive and the poem proposes that mastery of repetition, one of the key elements of music, is the highest human achievement.

I think we should find this extensive investment in the importance of sound for a viable understanding of the world (normally conceptualized through visual metaphors such as world, picture or view) strange because the idea that sound might constitute the world not only runs counter to the dominant scientific world view of matter that it is comprised of particles and forces, but also because our dominant metaphors for comprehending the world, even in the arts and humanities, largely draw upon space, time, building, and sight. Sound is secondary. It requires a material medium for its transmission, most of it is mere noise, its role in speech has been resolutely treated as mechanical or diacritical rather than semantic and cognitive, and, although our culture greatly values music, we lack the rich descriptive vocabulary for musical sound that we have for visual appearances and colors. Why then did Stevens invest so much belief in sound as a source of value, energy, and significance? Why should the ephebe begin his or her education by reflecting on the sounds of the word that interpellates him or her? I shall suggest these and other questions about Stevens' thematizing of sound will be answered only by looking at the modern history of sound, and that much of what makes his poetry of continuing interest is actually its failure to make this investment fully work. It remains utopian. Stevens at times appears to think that musical sound is the most evident symptom of the *geist* ("the heart / That is the common, the bravest fundament" that exults "with its great throat" [344]), though the poetry mostly has little to say about the collective historical work that creates language and culture all the way down to the expressive sounds either made by people or given significance by them.

HISTORIES

Why *did* Stevens invest so much belief in a cosmology of sound? Rather than no answers, there seem to be too many. A first response is likely to be along the lines that his poetry is corrective to what he and many modern thinkers believe has been an overvaluation of sight by reminding us again and again that the full realization of seeing requires aurality too. The el-

ders watching Susanna comprehend what they see as both the vision and a concomitant mingling of bass and pizzicati notes, and when she notices them watching her she experiences this gaze as accompanied by a dissonant music: "A cymbal crashed, / And roaring horns" (73). The real world is operatic. Poems, says "The Creations of Sound," ought to "make the visible a little hard / To see" (275) and by implication easier to hear, and they have the potential to do this because listening is a cognitive activity. A poem's music can "eke out the mind / On peculiar horns, themselves eked out / By the spontaneous particulars of sound" (275). The idea here is that the poem can help the mind "eke" out its scarce cognitive resources, especially when caught on the horns of a dilemma, by the way it provides a music that can sustain the mind's activity. Poetic music is in turn supported by all the fine grainy particulars of the acoustic activity of a poem, detail that encodes the concrete particulars on which the generalizations, or in more traditional terms, the universals of knowledge rest.

Asserting the authority of the aural is also one of Stevens' strategies for affirming secularization. He returns again and again to the notion that the modern world needs to think its way beyond religious myths, and each time he assays this idea he alludes to one of the oldest justifications for music and the importance of sound: its religious significance. Both Judaism and Christianity value sound, speech, and music above the images presented to the eye. The mistrust of "graven images" and icons, the many monitory biblical tales of people deceived by what they see into acts of lust and destruction, the association between spirit and speech or music have counterparts in Stevens' metaphysics: a poem should "make the visible a little hard / To see" and by implication, easier to hear. To achieve this he has to give sound an aura and acknowledge its "spirit": "Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit that we sought" (105), when listening to the singer at Key West. As Vincent Pecora argues, "the secularization through which magic or myth is eliminated by reason may never in fact be complete" (22).

Stevens' satirical pictures of Christian and Graeco-Roman ideas of heaven, for instance, ridicule images of spiritual aspiration by exposing their music as ribald comedy, full of noise and crude rhythms. Their sublime is best represented by onomatopoetic words—"tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" (47)—words whose lack of meaning or effaced meaning ("tank," though reputably semantic, struggles against the rhythm and rhyme to retain any semantic value) is counterbalanced by their insistent rhythm within the line's metric. In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," he is more subtle though even more damning in the passage about Christian myth: "A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell / And bade the sheep carouse" (346). The Christian message of resurrection and redemption is represented as the provision of music for orgiastic celebration and through the pun that echoes William Blake's account of the effect of the church on natural feeling: "priests in black gowns were

walking their rounds, / And binding with briars my joys and desires" (212). The problem for the poetry will be that it too will rely on "tremendous chords." As Pecora says: "One might then conclude that the society that produces Enlightenment never fully outgrows its desire for religious sources of coherence, solidarity, and historical purpose, and continually translates, or transposes, them into ever more refined and immanent, but also distorted and distorting, versions of its religious inheritance" (22). Although it would be too sweeping to say that Stevens transposes Christian investment in voice and music into "ever more refined and immanent" modes of articulation that also distort thought about epistemology, cognition, and the material world, the aptness of this judgment to some of his poetry alerts us to what we need to examine in order better to understand his "keener sounds."

This secularization is manifest in his heavy and anachronistic use of interjections, those "ohs" and "ahs" that belong in the same broad category of sound-words as the nonsense syllables. The British poet J. H. Prynne identifies Stevens as writing at the end of a long tradition of reliance on what he calls the "emphatical" (135) (a term he derives from William Hazlitt). Discussing "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," Prynne remarks that "the muting is what holds the most delicately low pitch momentarily free of its surrounding limits," and that Stevens attempts to "mark the tone of emphasis with a device protected by the traditions of poetic figure from seeming also the full responsibility of the poet" (169). Earlier in the lecture, Prynne shows that the use of the interjection "oh" draws on a history of poetic practice that relies on its simultaneous use as apostrophe to a deity or other power, and its role as an exclamation prompted by strong passion that cannot reach full semantic articulation at this moment of outburst. Prynne proposes that interjections such as "ah" and "oh" might be "markers for the emphatical compunction of a lost sacred language over-pitched in secular vacancy" (166), and though he concludes that there can be no such generalization about all usages of this type of exclamation, a skillful poet using exclamatory language may offer "a form of acknowledgement and dialectical holding to the locus of a demanding but possible truth, at least as much as simply the expression of some feeling about a moment particularly stressed by the pressures of experience" (167). Whether they are instances of secularizing taxidermy or living instances of belief, the interjection or "emphatical" can also "convoke the currencies of previous usage by quoting recursively the power of poetic speech itself" (168). When Stevens asks in section IV of "Academic Discourse at Havana," "Is the function of the poet here mere sound" (116), we might hear this as akin to the work of the musician, bringing to audibility again a music that has helped constitute his art as a tradition.

In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the interjection is used to signal strong feeling. "O my companion" (339) concludes the celebration of what could be Blake's "contraries." The section that contrasts the desire of

the birds for recognition from their environment expressed in a comically clumsy reflexive verb—"bethou me as you blow"—with a natural cry apparently lacking linguistic significance, "ké," introduces this cry with an interjection: "Ah, kél" (340). The result is to imbue the "ké" with some of the virtues of the "Ah," comparing them as similar utterances of strong passion, and creating possible parallels between the poetic intensities of the human interjection with that of the bird. The importance of this sound word is made more evident in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a poem that also uses this same interjection at a key moment. After the first two sections, which set the scene for the whole long poem, sections in which the audience calls for epistemological perfection from the poet and the poet demurs, saying that representations of the world are more like cadavers than living simulations, the third section begins with the pregnant word "Ah" (135). It is notoriously difficult to give a dictionary definition of such labile words but there is usually a suggestion of hesitation, of relief, of a second thought perhaps underlying the awe and regret heard in such an outburst. From the start of the poem, oral emphasis is crucial to the meaning of the dialectical stanzas. "They said, 'You have a *blue* guitar'" (135; my emphasis). Readers have to become aware that the color word is so significant that the stressed syllable of the iamb requires double emphasis to indicate that the guitar, the symbol of poetry, is somehow restricted in its range of expression to blueness. By starting the third section with "Ah," Stevens enacts his point. Sound is all, whether of blue guitars, poetry, or the world. In all three cases, Stevens is also reflecting on the deeper implications of a rejection of transcendence, and the interjection is, in Prynne's words, indeed "a marker for the boundary of one discourse where it is momentarily exceeded by another" (168). We have to rely on companions, hear the absence or loss of human meaning in the birdsong, or "play man number one" (135), and then deal with the implications.

"Is there a poem that never reaches words" (343), asks section IX of "It Must Change." Stevens' use of emphatic language as part of a wider strategy of secularization suggests that his nonsense syllables, whose role in his poetry has always fascinated readers and critics, might also function in this manner. If we connect this paralanguage with the history of conceptions of neologisms, interjections, and nonce onomatopoeia, we can see that these usages often have roots in cultural instability, and that such heavy emphasis on sound emerges from the poet's difficulties in articulating the profound historical disturbances through which he lived. Heavy reliance on neologisms of any kind is relatively rare among modernist poets and where it is used, the poet often draws on a background in sound poetry for legitimization (Maggie O'Sullivan is probably the most prominent contemporary practitioner in this field). Neologisms are viewed with some suspicion by lexicographers, grammarians, and literary critics who find them evidence of a range of moral and aesthetic failings. Webster is explicit about the dangers of neologizing, and defines a neologism as ei-

ther “a new word, usage, or expression” or “a usu. compound word coined by a psychotic and meaningless to the hearer.” The nonce word may be a sign of madness. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) is not much more encouraging: “Neologisms (new-coined words) tend now to be associated with novelty more than freshness, and sometimes with strained effects” (Preminger and Brogan 690). H. W. Fowler sums up common-sense beliefs about neologisms at the start of his classic account of good usage, *The King’s English*:

A “nonce-word” (and the use might be extended to “nonce-phrase” and “nonce-sense”—the latter not necessarily, though it may be sometimes, equivalent to nonsense) is one that is constructed to serve a need of the moment. The writer is not seriously putting forward his word as one that is for the future to have an independent existence; he merely has a fancy to it for this once. The motive may be laziness, avoidance of the obvious, love of precision, or desire for a brevity or pregnancy that the language as at present constituted does not seem to him to admit of. (29)

Fowler does not entertain the most salient motive animating Stevens’ inventive phonemes, the interest in onomatopoetic words that project moments when pure sound emerges awkwardly within discourse. His insistence that their use indicates a confidence in the value of the writing does fit Stevens’ case, however, and so too does his list of ordinary motives. Stevens strives to avoid the obvious because he wants to remove the accretions of habitual association from words and perceptions, and he highly values verbal precision for this reason, trying always to achieve what Fowler calls “pregnancy” (a gender politics of neologisms raises its head), or what we might call the quality of intensity. I cannot imagine anyone would call Stevens lazy, although few poets so insistently return to images of indolence (the exponents of the “tunk-a-tunk-tunk” sound are paradigms of it), and sometimes his sound words are intended to convey various forms of self-indulgent imagination.

Fowler’s animadversions draw our attention to the transgressive features of neologisms in terms of a folk psychology, but they also feature in other contexts as markers of cultural and social transgression because they expose the wiring of the intersubjectivity of language. It is worth emphasizing that neologisms are pervasive in everyday life, as new slang or parapraxes that gain local currency. Ron Silliman argues that usually in poetry “nonsense is a particularly complex instance of sense itself, not its erasure or Other” and that poems can “exploit the social category of the non-word as an aspect of their own agency.” He adds, “The onomatopoetic loses its force if we don’t acknowledge its special condition and thus becomes ‘only’ a word” (156). To use a neologism is to engage in a social practice

with potential consequences for collective life, and this special condition includes the implications of its transgression of the linguistic norm. Daniel Rosenberg has recently argued that the preoccupation with neology during the French Revolution marks the “consciousness of change so crucial to the period” (367), and that its opponents thought that language was one of the most active zones of conflict. The dictionary of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *La Néologie, ou vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptations nouvelles* (1801), attempted to promote change through neologisms. Mercier writes: “Neologers are everywhere, in the market halls just as in the Roman *Forum*, in the stock exchange, just as in the Senate. They are everywhere where liberty makes genius fruitful, where the imagination operates without constraint upon the models of nature, where thought can enlighten authority and defy tyranny” (Rosenberg 376). The extreme case of Mercier suggests that neologisms are signs of social instability, of aspirations to intervene in the historical process. He was particularly aware of the significance of onomatopoeia and its alleged role in the origins of language in pre-civilized peoples as Philippe Roger points out. Roger cites Mercier’s affirmation, “je serai un barbare,” and then comments that this “résume au plus juste le projet néologique de Mercier” [“summarizes as tersely as possible the neologiistic project of Mercier”] (346). Stevens’ poetry has many images of such primitivism: the Arabian can be imagined to say “je serai un barbare” by uttering his “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla how.”

The secularizing aim at work in Stevens’ uses of sound in poetry is therefore bound up with utopian impulses and with his critique of the collective life of modernity. With this in mind we can turn to other historical and aesthetic reasons for Stevens’ immersion in sound. The first of these I want to consider is the possibility that by pursuing “the less legible meaning of sounds,” he is deliberately putting legibility under pressure. Stevens may well be trying to resist the cognitive subsumption of the work of art under a philosophical or cultural paraphrase by retaining a resistant stratum of sound in the same manner that visual artists use brushwork and texture to resist easy pictorialization of the work by viewers. Many commentators on modernist aesthetics, notably Theodor Adorno, have drawn attention to modernist strategies of resistance to interpretation, and especially to their fragility in the face of dogmas of reason and ideology. Writing about primarily visual modes of poetic illegibility, Craig Dworkin concludes his study by summarizing the paradoxes for interpretation in stark terms: “Reading the illegible,” he writes, “nullifies its own account in the precise moment of its construction and obliterates the very object it would claim to have identified, creating a new space of erasure which cannot itself be read” (155). Earlier in his discussion, however, he opens a possibility that I believe can guide us in tracing the illegibility of sound in Stevens’ prosody: partially unreadable texts inhabit “the threshold at which writing passes between the field of human language and the inhumaness of sheer materiality” (82). This is what we witnessed in the opening of “Notes Toward

a Supreme Fiction" as control of attention swung between the quasi-philosophical argument and the abstract music of the phonemes. Stevens' text also displayed something else: the strange effects of diminished legibility. Instead of two sharply defined zones, intelligible language and unreadable materiality, we noticed that the pressure of proximity gave the sounds a narrative significance, and the cognitive ideas a material sheen. The old philosopher dying in Rome and deprived of ordinary vocal eloquence still manages utterance "without speech, / The loftiest syllables among loftiest things" (433), and the city reciprocates by abjuring any possibility "that mercy should be a mystery / Of silence" in favor of its choral bells and "reverberations clinging to whisper still" (434).

Many of Dworkin's most striking instances of illegibility arise from technological blottings such as overprinting and exaggerated dimensions of typography. Stevens' interest in sound is also deeply entwined with the technological developments of his time, especially those in the field of recording and transmission. He was a child of the recording revolution and the cinema, living through an age when the talking machines began to dissemble voices, music, and moving images from one spatio-temporal location and relocate them in another, where they no longer carried with them the authority of a presence. Many of the cues that enable a listener to gauge the commitment of a speaker to the truth of what is being affirmed in a verbal exchange are either non-verbal (posture, proximity, knowledge of the person's prior record as a reliable speaker) or hard to capture with all but the best recording and transmission equipment (such as the more fleeting aspects of intonation and pitch that indicate different degrees of commitment to what is said such as seriousness or sarcasm). Recorded music and voices, as well as broadcast programming, was still new enough to offer relatively poor audio reproduction and therefore be open to instabilities of reception, and more importantly still, to feel if not invasive, at least transgressive of boundaries. Andre Millard cites an advertising executive saying: "American businessmen, because of radio, are provided with a latch key to nearly every house in the nation" (172). Thoughtful users of the new technologies lived through a period of history in which the effusions of music, voices, recognizable sounds, and noise were disembedded from their points of generation, so that voices did come out of the floors, walls, and ceilings (274), called forth by the science of the day. Adjusting to the idea that this could happen to the voice meant reimagining how expression works, and particularly how to understand what happens to the sincerity on which truthfulness partly rests, if source and emitter of sound are severed by a distance traversed by electrons. Should a poet behave like X of "The Creations of Sound"?

If the poetry of X was music,
So that it came to him of its own,
Without understanding, out of the wall

Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,
Or chosen quickly, in a freedom
That was their element, we should not know

That X is an obstruction, a man
Too exactly himself, and that there are words
Better without an author, without a poet. . . . (274)

This enigmatic, abstract poem critiques the poet X, who presents poems as imitations of direct speech, concluding:

We do not say ourselves like that in poems.
We say ourselves in syllables that rise
From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak. (275)

The principle behind the metaphors of poetic inspiration in this poem as an external force is traditional enough (think of the Aeolian harp, for instance), yet these specific metaphors of sound radiating through a building could not have been written in the world before gramophones, radios, and telephones, instruments that all create the impression of speech and music coming out of solid objects, out of the walls, the very air of the modern world. One of the leading magazines for the new industry created by Edison was evocatively known as *Talking Machine World* (Millard 74). Some critics read this poem as a poststructuralist statement *avant la lettre*, a critical strategy that, as Marjorie Perloff notes, has enjoyed considerable currency (57). Susan Stewart reads it as a reminder of "Adorno's point that in the greatest lyric works it is language itself that is speaking and changing," because the language of the lyric "is already waiting to speak us" (89). The poem certainly projects a human condition in which sounds emerge from the world all around us, noises as well as words, and that we think at least as much with sound as we do with what we see, but this is presented as a material rather than a transcendental condition.

Although this "talking machine world" saturated with sound is not explicitly identified as a modern one, the insistence on sound emerging from the structures of our habitation is a modern perception. The description of what we usually call the implied author of the poem as a "being of sound" relies on the familiarity with those other "being[s] of sound" (275) who inhabit telephones, record players, and radios. What distinguishes this poem from the poststructuralist conception that the subject is spoken by language is that this poem is more materialist than that; this poem concentrates on the blurring of ontological boundaries between self, body, and sound in the modern world. The given that we start with is ambient sound, not the linguistic abstraction conceived by recent literary theory. When Stevens writes, "The poem is the cry of its occasion" (404), he affirms this because he lives in a "talking machine world" where the

sound of an “occasion” can be recorded so that its cry can be played back later when the occasion is no longer extant. Perhaps he could be a Max Planck of poetry who could find new modes of representing the radiation of sound. (Planck, who proposed the first quantum radiation model of energy, is a “symbol of ourselves” [866], Stevens told a lecture audience.) Perhaps he could be the poet-scientist of these rays of sound “that rise / From the floor.” This would be the sort of ambition one might expect in a world where sound radiated from the same type of electronic machines that produced the new rays.

Thinking of the real as a sonic landscape might also be an understandable reaction to the growing volume of modernity, its dynamics made almost tangible in the distancing of sound from what it expressed. Our cities hum not only with cars but also with air-conditioning fans, and our listening space is saturated with electronically reproduced sounds of music and voices transmitted from elsewhere, so that almost wherever we are in any social space “a familiar music of the machine / Sets up its *Schwärmerei*” (its raptures or effusions) (334). Tim Armstrong, in a recent essay that links Schopenhauer, the player piano, and Stevens, argues that his poetry offers itself as a “serio-comic surrender to the machinery” (17) in its attitude to the “integrative function” (11) of music. Music enables us to work through the temporality of memory, of the disjunction between perception and recollection, a disjunction that the recording machine also reintegrates. (Armstrong notes that Adorno claims that a recording textualizes the music that it preserves.) Poetry itself becomes a kind of recording machine in this account, which privileges music as the paradigm of the human relation to the temporalities of sound, and leaves somewhat open questions about other types of sound and other features of sound than those active within memory, especially the expressive.

Tim Armstrong rightly links recordings with the philosophical theme of repetition, and this is one of the culminating themes of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” as well as a dominant characteristic of the opening of the poem. Its mastery is the characteristic of the “man-hero” (350). When Stevens uses his repetitions of sound, his “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla how” of sound, he is working with a surprisingly wide palette of cultural implications. These social energies include secularization, the modernist reflexivity of the medium, the impact of new technologies of communication, fears about the loss of rationality, and desires for radical social change. Hearing them is difficult partly because their legibility is often tested and partly because Stevens tends to be averse to explicit recognition of the intellectual and collective labor that makes audibility possible.

Sound as a mode of thought, the significance of sound for the long cultural process of secularization, utopian aspirations expressed in words at the borders of sense, the shock of immersion in a new world of music, and voices recorded and transmitted for replay in the absence of the originators, a pataphysical cosmology of sound—as Stevens works through these

sometimes clashing influences, he repeatedly risks and admits failure. Sight, for instance, enjoys cultural dominance for good reason. How persuasive is a cosmology of sound? Its association with angels and “withered” poetic tropes often suggests that the poet is uncertain. Emphatic language and onomatopoetic neologisms also embrace failure, as we have seen. Some aspects of the new capacity for sonic reproduction are also troubling, especially their implications for confidence about sound as a sign of vitality. Stevens wants sound to be a sign that something lively is happening here and now, either because living things are active or the inanimate world is releasing dynamic energy. If sound is mere reproduction, it might indicate only a fossil vitality. The new communications technologies also make evident the problems of legibility or inaudibility, whether as the hiss of radio carrier waves drowning the station, or static and damage creating crackles. Sound can drown sense. By choosing to begin with a section addressed to the ephebe/reader, in which phonemes become half-legible subjects and predicates of the syntax, Stevens begins with the recursive complexities and potential limitations of the necessarily phonetic language of poetry and the challenge of modernist sound. No wonder the poem becomes so inconclusive.

AFTERWORD

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” not only has difficulty with beginnings that can only be projected through reflexive attention to the sound of language and the modern languages of sound, it also has difficulty with endings, notoriously offering two endings, almost in the manner of an experimental novel. Section IX is often taken as stating one of what will have to pass for the resolutions that can be offered by the poem, that our aim should be to master repetition rather than yearn for ideal states of permanence such as are embodied in the concepts of angels and origins. Section X strays into gender stereotyping that readers today are likely to be made uneasy by: the “Fat girl” whose “evasions” must be checked, the apparent embodiment of emotion, growth, nature, and even irrationality (351). The first person is more strongly evident in this section than anywhere else in the poem, as if it is now possible to offer the authority of the poet’s own authentic introspection as evidence for the poem’s contention that poets and moderns will continue to create fictions, imagining that they have direct access to the world given by the senses. As a result, even the supposedly knowledgeable poet, who began by instructing the comparatively ignorant ephebe, now concludes by admitting to being an ephebe himself, creating not solar myths of Phoebus, but something equally abstracted, a “fluent mundo,” no longer “revolving except in crystal” (351). Just as the opening section balanced a confident, intellectual argument with a counterpoint of sonic equations that undercut the authoritative stance of the address, so here at the end similar instabilities arise.

In the second ending, the poet appears to try to justify poetry in a time of world war, explaining that the soldiers need what poets produce. Images of this necessity, however, are disturbing, both in the scale of their claims and their latent violence. "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines," we are told, and so far so good, but then more troubling notes enter, first a note of self-contempt ("His petty syllabi") and then an image that contains troubling resonances: "the sounds that stick, / Inevitably modulating, in the blood" (352). Bullets and blades stick in the blood, and the stickiness of blood is usually evident only in the presence of a wound. Stevens and his readers will also be aware that this is a war in which "blood" as a metaphor of race and kinship has poisonous associations. It is hard to know how to respond to this complex constellation of meanings, and that I think is part of its point. The final section, far from being utopian, reminds us of the collective historical work that creates language and culture all the way down to the expressive sounds either made by people or given significance by them. This historical work is prone to failure as well as achievement. Gender oppression or nationalist strife can lead to terrible destruction, and these too are part of the world of sound. If the ending feels as much like failure as a conclusive ending, this is because the poem has circled back to its beginning. Phoebus's death has been joined by those of many others, and yet the poem still wants us to stick to the guiding conception of the world as "fluent," a universe that articulates itself through sound.

I want to end by invoking a recent poem that reflects back on the complex legacy of Stevens' ambitious failures to create a counter-modernity of sound. Susan Howe has given as much thought as any living poet to Stevens' concern with the legibility of sound at the barriers of sense, leading her to title one section of an early poem, *Defenestration of Prague*, "Speeches at the Barriers." In her recent collection, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe includes a poem sequence, "118 Westerly Terrace," based on the daily walks Stevens took from his house to his office, using images and phrases from those poems in which he ponders elusive presences at the edge of sense. She is particularly interested in his legacy to other poets, and in this passage she describes an intersubjectivity of sound that is transmitted across generations:

I heard myself as if you
had heard me utopically
before reflection I heard
you outside only inside
sometimes only a word (96)

Her intricate syntactical shiftings bring out the issue of the difficulty of finding a boundary between the objectivity and subjectivity of sound, as well as the metaphorics of listening to the sound of a voice. The act

of listening is curiously locationless or “utopic” (a recent neologism derived from “utopian” that appears to have emerged in the last few years to sidestep the pejorative associations of “utopian”), and she also hears in Stevens the belief that poetry can point to a utopian condition. In her treatment though a note of skepticism remains. “Sometimes,” she implies, the result is “only a word.” Sound in Stevens we might say, by way of a conclusion to these questions about what it means to him, is “utopic” in all senses of that word, with all the insights, risks, and failings that are inherent in such a belief.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 330. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with the page number only in parentheses.

² I am interpreting rhyming in the broad sense used by Robert Duncan and other contemporary poets to include phonological and other features of poetry, including images, that rely on echoing similitudes.

³ The concept of the “logical space of reasons” was proposed by Wilfrid Sellars and now enjoys wide recognition by contemporary philosophers.

⁴ My attention was drawn to Empson’s interest in such tensions of high and low art by an essay by Drew Milne, “The Art of Wit and the Cambridge Science Park” (172).

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