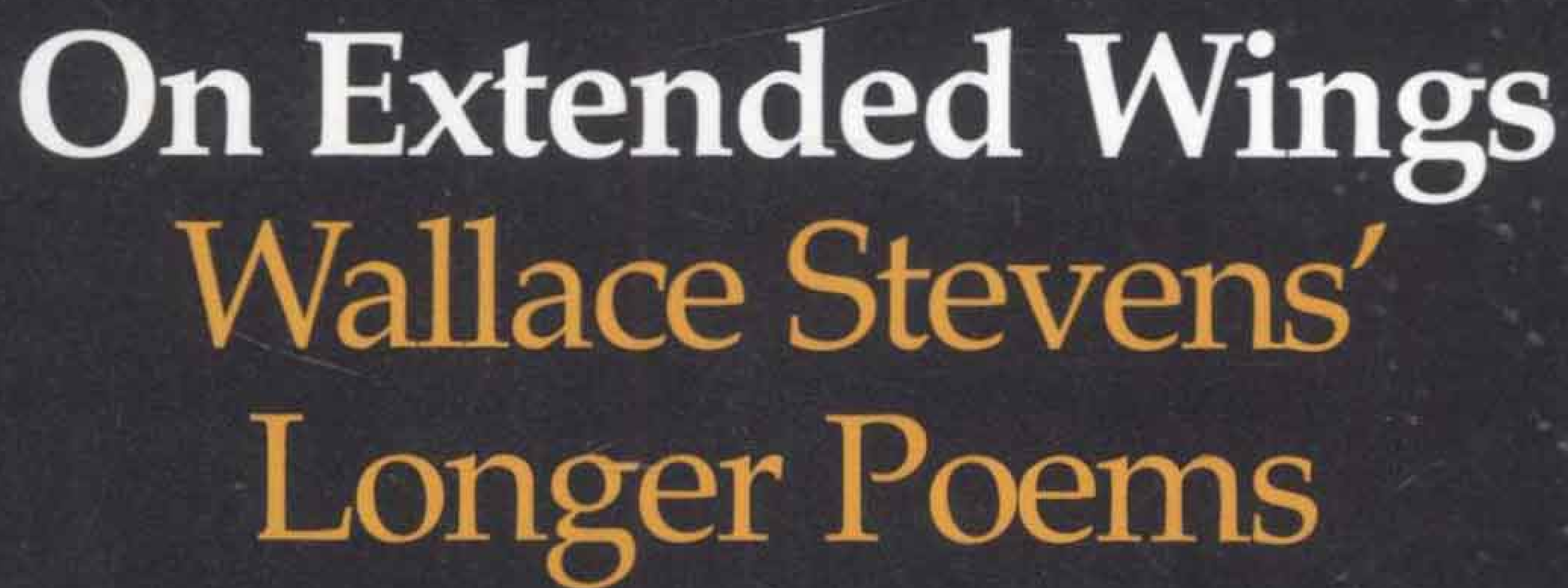

On Extended Wings

Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems

Helen Vendler

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by Helen Hennessy Vendler

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To I. A. RICHARDS

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Contents

	Introduction: The Two Poetries	1
I.	The Pensive Man: The Pensive Style	13
II.	Fugal Requiems *The Comedian as the Letter C, Sunday Morning, Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*	38
III.	The Sausage Maker *Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery* and *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*	65
IV.	The Volcano Apostrophe, The Sea Behold *Owl's Clover*	79
V.	A Duet with the Undertaker *The Man with the Blue Guitar*	119
VI.	Abecedarium of Finesoldier *Examination of the Hero in a Time of War*	144

VII. The Amassing Harmony 168
Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

VIII. The Metaphysical Changes 206
Esthétique du Mal and *Description without Place*

IX. Douceurs, Tristesses 231
Credences of Summer and *The Auroras of Autumn*

X. The Total Leaflessness 269
An Ordinary Evening in New Haven

XI. Naked Alpha: Epilogue 309

Notes 317

Introduction: The Two Poetries

Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words.

Stevens, like Keats, believed in writing long poems, and defended the practice to Harriet Monroe in 1922: "The desire to write a long poem or two is not obsequiousness to the judgment of people. On the contrary, I find that prolonged attention to a single subject has the same result that prolonged attention to a senora has, according to the authorities. All manner of favors drop from it. Only it requires a skill in the varying of the serenade that occasionally makes me feel like a Guatemalan when one particularly wants to feel like an Italian" (*L*, 230).[1] He continued in his next letter, "I wish that I could put everything else aside and amuse myself on a large scale for a while. One never gets anywhere in writing or thinking or observing unless one can do long stretches at a time. Often I have to let go, in the most insignificant poem, which scarcely serves to remind me of it, the most skyey of skyey sheets. And often when I have a real fury for indulgence I must stint myself" (*L*, 231). For the rest of Stevens' life, long poems alternated with short ones, and while it may be that Stevens will be forever anthologized as the poet of "The Snow Man," his own sense of balance required verse on a large scale. He thought of calling *Harmonium* "The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae," and at one time he wanted his collected poems called

The Whole of Harmonium: both titles were perhaps evoked by Shelley's assertion in the *Defense of Poetry* that all poems are "episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world."

The long poem was a discipline to the poet, but we may suspect that it was a liberation as well: when Stevens speaks of the effect of reading a long poem, he is probably drawing on the experience of writing one. A long poem, he says, "comes to possess the reader and . . . naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there" (*NA*, 50): "In a long poem, so many emotions, so many sensations, are stirred up into activity that, after a time, the reader finds himself in a state of such sensibility that it cannot be said that the scale and deliberateness of allegory fail to produce an emotional effect. A prolonged reading of Spenser's Faerie Queene, for instance, creates just such a state of sensibility. In general, long poems have this attribute, derived from their very length, assuming that they have been charged throughout with the emotions of the poet" (*NA*, 111–112). Though Stevens never wrote anything approaching the length of *The Faerie Queene*, he implies that his own long poems can have the same naturalizing power, and in fact they do. We become most acclimated to Stevens in reading them, and they form the illumined large to which the lyrics, volume by volume, attach themselves. In each period of Stevens' life as a poet, they are characteristic, and to read them in sequence is one way, if not the only way, of tracing both his states of feeling and his enterprises and inventions. It is also true that his greatest poems, by almost any judgment, are the longer ones, whether one agrees with Yvor Winters' preference for "Sunday Morning," Harold Bloom's for *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, Daniel Fuchs' for *Esthetique du Mal*, or yet choose, as I am sometimes inclined to do, *The Auroras of Autumn*.[2]

Through the long poems Stevens discovered his own strengths.

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It was, for instance, not until 1942, in *Notes*, that he settled on his final metrical form. Even then, he deserted that form to write *Esthetique du Mal* in 1944, and returned to it only in 1948, with *The Auroras of Autumn.* Those triads, as everyone has recognized, somehow organize his mind in its long stretches better than any other alternative, and yet to reach them he had to experiment with blank verse, couplets, ballads, terza rima, sonnetlike forms, and so on. This is the most obvious instance of Stevens' patient experimentation toward his own voice, but others come to light in reading the long poems. They are all directed toward a proper mode for his austere temperament, which is as different as can be from the temperament of Whitman or Wordsworth or Keats or Tennyson, those poets from whom he learned and to whom he is often compared. Neither is his sense of the world that of the French poets, however much he learned from them in his Harvard years. His manner was slow in evolving, and it evolved through his sense of himself and through a search for his own style: "A man's sense of the world is born with him and persists, and penetrates the ameliorations of education and experience of life. His species is as fixed as his genus. For each man, then, certain subjects are congenital. Now, the poet manifests his personality, first of all, by his choice of subject. Temperament is a more explicit word than personality and would no doubt be the exact word to use, since it emphasizes the manner of thinking and feeling" (*NA*, 120).

Most criticism of Stevens has been concerned, understandably, with his "choice of subject" — variously defined. Some readers have seen his subject as an epistemological one, and have written about his views on the imagination and its uneasy rapport with reality. Others have seen his subject as a moral one, a justification of an aesthetic hedonism. Still others have seen his subject as a native humanist one, the quest of the American Adam for a Paradise in the wilderness. Stevens of course offers

justification for all these views, and it is perhaps partial, in view of his many letters and essays on reality and the imagination, to prefer one of his more wayward statements, as usual objectively put, of what his own subject was, and how it developed through his life. Nevertheless, this brief summation seems closest in spirit to the Stevens one finds in the greatest poems: "One's cry of O Jerusalem becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience" (*OP*, 260). This confession needs to be completed by the third stage of that repeated cry: after O Jerusalem, after the cry to something near, comes that final unseeking cry of the very late poems, notably "The Course of a Particular." A year or so earlier, Stevens had written that the poem was the "cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it," but he could not rest in this partial identification of cry and creation. At last the cry is entirely simple:

> Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
> Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
> It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.
>
> The leaves cry . . . One holds off and merely hears the
> cry.
> It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
> And though one says that one is part of everything,
>
> There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
> And being part is an exertion that declines:
> One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.
>
> The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
> Nor the smoke drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
> It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.

> In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
> Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
> Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.
> (*OP* 96–97)[3]

This is, of Stevens, "the text he should be born that he might write," to paraphrase his own line in *Description without Place.* One can hardly doubt that the leaves, as well as being leaves, are Stevens too, and that he has gone beyond crying out to Jerusalem, beyond crying out even to a living name or place or thing, beyond all directed cries at all. Utterance is utterance, and the exertion to make it something more has disappeared. Stevens recapitulates in this poem all his previous efforts — his efforts to be part of the universe, his efforts to create divinities, heroes, and human beings, all his fantasia — and dismisses those attempts at self-transcendence in the presence of this pure sound. This is "the authentic and fluent speech" he told Harriet Monroe (*L*, 231) he hoped eventually to perfect for himself, a syllable intoning "its single emptiness":

> It is here, in this bad, that we reach
> The last purity of the knowledge of good. (294)

But before the authentic came many trials of the less and the more authentic, and before the fluent came episodes of the halting and the borrowed, times when Stevens wanted to feel like an Italian and felt instead like a Guatemalan, as he wryly said. All these "trials of device" are recorded in his major poems, and underneath them all is the fatal stratum he will at last discover in *The Auroras of Autumn*, that blank which Harold Bloom rightly traces back to Emerson's *Nature*: "The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye,"[4] or as Stevens writes,

A blank underlies the trials of device,
The dominant blank, the unapproachable. (477)

If we find, in reading Stevens, that he tries and discards mode after mode, genre after genre, form after form, voice after voice, model after model, topic after topic, we also find a marvelous sureness mysteriously shaping his experiments. The story does not have an entirely happy ending: *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* represents a decline from *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* and *The Auroras of Autumn*, as even Stevens himself seems to have recognized when he called it "this endlessly elaborating poem" and wished that it could have been written by "a more severe, more harassing master" who could propose "subtler, more urgent proof" than he could himself (486). On the other hand, there are short pieces written in Stevens' last years which are the equal of anything he ever wrote, and, some would say, the best poems he ever wrote. Each poem is of course autonomous: "We never arrive intellectually," as Stevens said, "but emotionally we arrive constantly (as in poetry, happiness, high mountains, vistas)" (*OP*, 173). But each is also a stage in a sequence of development.

We keep, in reading Stevens, a double attitude, seeing the major poems both as things in themselves and as steps in a long progress toward his most complete incarnations of his sense of the world: "What is the poet's subject? It is his sense of the world. For him, it is inevitable and inexhaustible. If he departs from it he becomes artificial and laborious and while his artifice may be skillful and his labor perceptive no one knows better than he that what he is doing, under such circumstances, is not essential to him" (*NA*, 121). This is Stevens speaking, no doubt, of his own writing, and if we call him at times artificial and laborious we may be forgiven since he was there before us. There was no way for him to leap over those artifices; he had to go on by way of them: "The truth is that a man's sense of the

world dictates his subjects to him and that this sense is derived from his personality, his temperament, over which he has little control and possibly none, except superficially. It is not a literary problem. It is the problem of his mind and nerves. These sayings are another form of the saying that poets are born not made" (*NA*, 122). That is Stevens' bluntest statement of what he clearly thought about his own poetry, and he gives instances: "A poet writes of twilight because he shrinks from noon-day. He writes about the country because he dislikes the city . . . There are stresses that he invites; there are stresses that he avoids . . . In music he likes the strings. But the horn shocks him. A flat landscape extending in all directions to immense distances placates him. But he shrugs his shoulders at mountains" (*NA*, 122). The long poems give us very clearly Stevens' world, and naturalize us in it, so that we may be forgiven also if we say he invites this, he avoids that, he shrinks from this, he is shocked by this, he is indifferent to something else, he is consoled by these things. This is not censure, it is classification in the human world.

In the same essay, "Effects of Analogy," Stevens adds that the second way by which a poet manifests his personality is by his style: "What has just been said with respect to choice of subject applies equally to style. The individual dialect of a poet who happens to have one, analogous to the speech common to his time and place and yet not that common speech, is in the same position as the language of poetry generally when the language of poetry generally is not the common speech" (*NA*, 123). Describing the individual dialect proper to any poet is difficult, the more so in the case of Stevens since there are such marked changes in his style. As Marianne Moore once said, his poems "suggest a linguist creating several languages within a single language." [5] There are some general traits which survive from *Harmonium* to *The Rock*, and which are in combination distinctive to Stevens; these habits of language are briefly set forth below, in the chapter prefacing the individual commentaries on

the long poems. A style is not easily describable as a whole, and summaries tend to be general or misleading,[6] since the same attitude can take different forms, or the same form embody different attitudes. In specific instances where only a single poem is in question, more justice can be done both to Stevens and to the poem at hand.

Stevens' "progress" has sometimes been put in terms of the "abandonment of rhetoric" after *Owl's Clover*.[7] Stevens himself gave currency to this legendary account of his progress by Crispin's rejection of the exotic, and by some of his disparaging remarks on rhetoric in *The Necessary Angel*: "What then, is it to live in the mind with the imagination, yet not too near to the fountains of its rhetoric, so that one does not have a consciousness only of grandeurs, of incessant departures from the idiom and of inherent altitudes?" (*NA*, 141). But *The Man with the Blue Guitar* is by no means unrhetorical, and to define Stevens' new spareness we need to see its own rhetoric, as in winter he reminded himself that the branches were not "bare" but that the junipers were shagged with ice and the spruces were rough in the distant glitter of the January sun.

To make Stevens' poetic arrangements clear to the eye I have not hesitated to realign certain poems according to their rhetorical rather than their metrical shape, to reprint others to show their true rhythmic form rather than their putative one, and in general to violate, for a purpose, Stevens' own lineation, assuming always a *Collected Poems* near at hand for the reader where the true poem can be found.

Stevens has suffered, as Shakespeare, Pope, Wordsworth, and others have, from the dreadful repetitive effect of moral paraphrase by his critics. Shaw notoriously believed, or said he did, that Shakespeare was no more than platitudes combined with superb "word music." A. Alvarez has, however unwillingly, put the same objection in regard to Stevens: "It is this that, for

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