Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language

Stefan Holander

Studies in Major Literary Authors

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Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language
Stefan Holander

For Guro

Abbreviations

WORKS BY WALLACE STEVENS

CP *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.

CPP *Collected Poetry and Prose.* Ed. Kermode, Frank and Joan Richardson. New York: The Library of America, 1997.

NA *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination.* London: Faber & Faber, 1984.

L *The Collected Letters of Wallace Stevens.* Ed. Holly Stevens. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

OP *Opus Posthumous.* Revised, Enlarged and Corrected Edition. Ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

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Contents

Introduction

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

"The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" (*CP* 512)

STEVENS' TRIALS OF DEVICE: POETRY AS A STRUGGLE WITH LANGUAGE

This is a study of Wallace Stevens' poetic language. Announcing this may immediately evoke a hotly contested area of critical debate in which Stevens has played a major, if often unbecoming, part: the relationship between modern poetry and what is often summed up in a simplifying way as modern reality. It also raises a question that is not less vital just because it is difficult, perhaps even insoluble: what is, and is not, indicated in the concept of poetic language? The fact is that most of us, as Stevens proposed "are never," or at least rarely, "at a loss to recognize poetry." But this does not, as he added, appear to make it "easy for us to propose a center of poetry, a *vis* or *noeud vital,* to which, in the absence of a definition, all the variations of definition are peripheral" (*NA* 44–5). To the contrary, students of poetry have often attempted to find ways of defining—which has often meant defending—the peculiar meaningfulness of poetic art, often assuming that it may depend on the existence of precisely such an essence or *noeud vital.* In spite of the apparent self-confidence of Stevens' remark, at a high point of his career, and despite the glories of his poetry, his poetic project can also be seen, both in its theory and its practice, as a defense of poetry.

In the lecture quoted here, delivered at Harvard in 1946, Stevens' image of the poet's role attained almost megalomaniac proportions—"if the poet discovered and had the power thereafter at will and by intelligence to reconstruct us by his transformations" he "would also have the power to destroy us" (*NA* 45). This idea, however, was at odds with the acute realization that *his* language, his *poetic* language, was also the language of everybody else, of people who were not only, as Harold Bloom reminds us,[1] his poetic forefathers, but the people around him, those which Ortega y Gasset had frightfully summarized as "The Mass Man." This sense of exteriority and collectivity in language suggests that, in several senses, poetry's language is a 'material' language, and that the imagination—Stevens' Romantic synonym for poetic creativity—could not simply be imagined as an "act of the mind," a matter of workings of consciousness, but needed to deal directly with this 'material.' 'Material' may suggest several, mutually implicated, meanings: the physical body of the letter as ink on the printed, mass-produced page; the phonetic sound the letters refer to as realized physically in the human body and captured by the senses; the phonemic, linguistic entity referred to by this sound, and the meanings created by their differential combinations within a language system; the sense in which this language system itself is shaped by its function within a social, cultural and political order and, not least, the way this order is built on a 'material' economic structure in which a book of poems, for example, can function as a commodity for consumption. In this taxonomy, 'material' is in each case (except possibly in the case of the ink) a metaphor for, indicating, something else.

When Beverly Maeder, whose innovative study of Stevens' poetry attempts to avoid his own dualistic and consciousness-based idea of poetic language, proposes to study the "surface texture" or "material body" of his poems, she implies more or less all of these meanings, and their interconnections.[2] Her focus on Stevens' concrete work of linguistic renovation in terms of the most fundamental "non- or extra-ontological" patterns of the English language—graphic, prosodic, figurative, grammatical, lexical, syntactic, but also ideologically operative—brings out its liberating, future-oriented possibilities. This study aims to continue along similar lines, assuming that the material of poetry is to a significant extent language itself. It will do so, however, by taking a step 'back' into Stevens' dualistic universe to consider a more problematic sense of 'materiality.' If poetic language is understood as an expressive means or instrument, a 'device' itself problematically autonomous—prior and exterior—it may not only suggest new possibilities for creativity, but is likely to insinuate a conflict with a conception of poetry as mental act or subjective expression. To explore this predicament, I will not

primarily direct the reader's attention to Stevens' most apparent moments of artistic mastery, in the sense that we may experience that it transcends historical, ideological and linguistic constraints. The primary focus will instead be on a number of poems from the period of aesthetic and ideological unease when Stevens returned to publishing in the early 30s, adding a few poems to his first collection, *Harmonium,* and writing the poems included in *Ideas of Order,* a collection which Stanley Burnshaw suggested, in a famous critical intervention in 1935, was "screeching with confusion."[3]

In this period, more visibly than in any other, Stevens' art was under a keenly felt pressure to represent and ideally intervene in reality as conceived from a social and political rather than ontological viewpoint. This was a very difficult task indeed since 'the real'—a term of both epistemological and ethical import, and a great deal more severe than the merely 'realistic'—was often understood as *opposed to* the aesthetically valuable. In this sense, my discussion responds to a tendency, in evidence from the very beginning of Stevens' career, either to praise his poetry for artistic self-sufficiency or criticize it for its reluctance or incapacity to represent and communicate with reality in its social and political aspects, reproaching him for 'escapism,' 'dandyism,' 'hedonism'[4] and later 'monologue.'[5] While any response to such extreme positions itself risks becoming a 'defense,' bringing simplistic results and rehearsing old arguments, such statements are not only frequent and powerful enough to command attention but also indicate a quality which is essential to Stevens' modernism: a fear of exclusion and of expressive and cultural impotence which accompanies his search for exclusiveness and informs some of his poetry's constitutive metaphors.

In this sense, my study tries to capture one of the fundamental, creative, paradoxes of Stevens' poetry. At the same time as it claims enormous expressive powers, taking "the place of mountains," or mounts a poetics of resistance against hegemonic political and religious discourses, his poetry is both pervaded by and motivated by a sense of ominous futility. Thus, even when considered as a means to expressive freedom, idiosyncrasy and self-determination, poetry is in this way always threatened by its own possible enclosure, both because of its deviant particularity which risks a separation from the world, and its unfortunate, unwilling, belonging to it. This generates a sense of failure to be indispensably unique, as it appears to be merely repeating that which already exists.

In my approach as well as my choice of poetry, my study relates to Helen Vendler's notion that Stevens' later poetry has overcome a long, arduous process of 'trials of device.'[6] This phrase, from the line "A blank underlies the trials of device," (CPP 477) of the late poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

(*CP* 465–89), was used by Vendler to indicate the struggles with a resilient poetic language set off in the thirties by powerful 'realist' demands for social and political relevancy. Such 'trials of device,' then, were also 'trials of reality,' since one way of meeting the new demands on poetic language would be to move it closer to modern material, cultural and linguistic reality, possibly (as Stevens feared) by renouncing poetic difference and privilege altogether. This study assumes that neither the 'devices' nor the 'trials,' the sense of poetry as a continuous struggle with language, ceased to be central sources of creativity in Stevens' later poetry. A close look at a period in which they appear at their most intense—and in which their materiality is both heavily emphasized and amply defined—may be useful for what it enables us to see of vital elements in Stevens' poetry, both earlier and later.

I begin by investigating Stevens' conception of poetic language as an exclusive interior reality, a private space, and how this idea comes to shape Stevens' ambiguous view of abstraction as both a means of capturing the eidetic or cognitive essentials of reality and a means of fateful and falsifying closure to the actual world. Both implications, I argue, are closely tied to his sense of the material aspects of poetic language and the complex figurative and kinesthetic use of inherited poetic device, including his ambivalent and ironic use of diction, metaphor and prosodic form. Starting in Stevens' end-of-century experiences at Harvard and continuing through his subsequent encounter with urban modernity in New York, the argument makes its way to Stevens' troubled thirties and, finally, to a few examples his later poetics, on which most positive critical accounts are based, and where the idea of abstraction plays a central role. One particularly powerful image will play a central part in this argument: the idea that poetry is not only written within the confines of a room, but that it implies, even composes, a room. This is not just a metaphor for the poet's mind rooted in the concrete writing situation but also related to the fact that Stevens' sense of enclosure, in both these senses, was tightly intertwined with his fear of an inadequate language.

Chapter II studies a number of poems grappling with an impasse described in two central metaphors of poetic transcendence; motion, closely linked to the desire for aesthetic change, and voice, describing the capacity for authentic or idiosyncratic speech. The sense of impasse conveyed in these poems, I will argue, is intensely ambiguous, as Stevens' very mobile metaphorics represents poetry's expressive and kinetic failure as very close indeed to indicating a renovation of language. This argument is developed in Chapter III, which studies how Stevens' poetry both uses and (re)presents mutually implicated 'devices'—images, diction and rhythmic patterning—that are perceived as hostile to fresh perception and expressive singularity.

Here too, the study deals with significant ambiguities, since his acknowledgment of linguistic and cultural decay, vulgarity and repetitiousness is also understood as a way to accomplish renovation and idiosyncrasy. Chapter IV deals closely with Stevens' imaginative enactment of poetry's necessary movement toward 'reality' in a programmatic and linguistically fascinating poem, "Farewell to Florida," whose ambivalent but obsessive exploitation of the mutually implicated "devices" of rhythmic and metaphoric movement is discussed in terms of the notions of poetic transcendence and failure suggested in the preceding chapters.

My study is a result of a sense of wonder at two different but closely related phenomena: on the one hand, the capacity of Stevens' poetry to generate widely different, often contradictory, critical response[7] and, on the other, the comparative scarcity of studies of his poetry 'as poetry,' in terms of its peculiar forms of linguistic expression. My argument is indebted to the articles of the special 1991 issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* named "Stevens and Structures of Sound," and in books by critics such as Marie Borroff,[8] Anca Rosu,[9] Andrew Lakritz[10] and Maeder, who, along with rhetorically oriented critics like Charles Altieri,[11] Jacqueline Brogan[12] and Angus Cleghorn,[13] have explicitly or implicitly intended to formulate a value in Stevens' poetic language within a modernist context whose dominant notions of formal change have often appeared either indifferent or hostile to it. Such critics have also aimed to remedy the tendency in Stevens criticism to relegate the discussion of poetic construction into marginal, shorthand observations, rather than a vital part of textual research—a tendency which Marjorie Perloff in 1985 (I believe wrongly) blamed on a similar uninterest in Stevens himself.[14]

The formalist trend in Stevens studies bears an interesting relation to another development: the biographical and historicist research of the late eighties and nineties, when critics like James Longenbach,[15] Frank Lentricchia,[16] Alan Filreis,[17] Joan Richardson,[18] Milton Bates[19] and George Lensing[20] drew attention to relatively unexplored, even disregarded, periods in Stevens' career, most importantly to moments when his art was under pressure or in crisis. These critics offered new diachronic perspectives on his poetry, exposing significant differences not only between different periods in his career, but also between different poems. Together, I would argue, historicist and formalist studies of Stevens do not only enable an understanding of his poems as a response to complex historical moments but also, in the sense of Stevens' contemporary Kenneth Burke, as *strategic* utterances, pervaded by a historicity defined partly in their own, often intentionally deviant, language.[21]

To an extent, I read Stevens's poetry with a sense of historical context. The period under scrutiny below has not only been central to historicist

readings, but is also one in which his poems are highly attentive of their own contemporaneity and, in a sense, theorize their own historicity—which in Stevens' case can mean both a lack or excess thereof. It is crucial to this study, however, that their way of doing this is in *poetry*, in the peculiar language of singular poems, which includes their rhythm, meter and sound-patterning. Even when the original historical context of the poem recedes from attention, my analysis will thus move closer to the way such moments are represented in the scripted 'realities' of a poem, understood in terms of a response, even when such a response appears deviant, distorting and dismissive.

STEVENS AS FORMALIST

In this study, Stevens will be approached as a 'formalist' poet, concerned with refashioning and expanding the possibilities of poetic diction and prosody. In a study of the formal impulses shaping both the writing and reception of modern American poetry, Stephen Cushman has helpfully distinguished two common ways of understanding the term 'formalist.' On the one hand, it has been used to indicate poets who are content to write in traditional metric form—like the present-day "New Formalists." While Stevens has often been defined in this way, Cushman places him mid-ways between such "formalists" and their clear-cut opposites: poets for whom 'form,' as a pre-existing, conventional constraint on expression, carries a strictly negative sense. A next-to perfect formulation of the latter can be found in T.S. Eliot's retrospective account, in a lecture at Glasgow University in 1942 called "The Music of Poetry," where he described the formal revolution of modern poetry as consisting of

> . . . a revolt against dead form, and a preparation for new form or for the renewal of the old; it was an insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical.[22]

Clearly, the anti-traditional impulse implicit in this statement should be weighed against other declarations in which Eliot argues that traditional patterns can, and should, play a vital part in modern poetry, whose very modernity may depend on the poet's immersion in literary tradition, suggesting that a formal renewal is most likely "a renewal of the old," and thus, in line with his first metaphor, a kind of spectral revival of the dead. What is more, Eliot's practical criticism continuously stressed that "new form" needs to be more rigorously shaped than the poetry that precedes it.[23] It is precisely in this sense, Cushman argues, that *any* strong American poet