

# Sound at an Impasse

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IF WALLACE STEVENS CONTENDED, “There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning”<sup>1</sup>; if he argued that poetry “makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration”; and if he insisted that “above everything else, poetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds” (662–63)—then why has not the critical response to Stevens put sound at the center of the discussion? Although one can think of perhaps a dozen reasons, here are six: (1) fear of mannerist reputation; (2) guilt by association with the non-innovative; (3) Hi Simons; (4) Stevens’ dull-seeming poetry readings; (5) a lagging interest among critics in sound technology; (6) a certain deafness in the project of disclosing Stevens’ politics.

Early critics in particular feared that focus on sound might too closely associate their own projects with a dead-end mannerism. At the beginning of a perceptive chapter on “Noble Accents and Inescapable Rhythms” in a book of 1967, Robert Buttel warned us—it is my sense that he was also warning himself—that “Stevens suffers from convolutions of style . . . that will wither in the trials of time; no doubt a number of Stevens’ most mannered efforts will meet this fate” (203). Few critics wanted to risk, by association, sharing that fate. As Willard Spiegelman points out in “Sense and Nonsense: Stevens’ Sounds,” “sonic things wink . . . to make all of Stevens’ readers squirm,” and this was for most of us the first Stevens we encountered—Stevens in “zany post-Victorian” mode, as Spiegelman puts it, less tragic and far less relevant in the late 1960s and 1970s than most of us wanted to seem. Buttel’s chapter, which seems at first to be about the sound of Stevens’ poetry, is finally about other topics, primarily the modernist’s relationship to the tradition, or the *idea* of the tradition, of English prosody. Buttel begins, however, by quoting at length from Stevens’ response to T. S. Eliot’s most cadenced free verse, an aesthetic, when sounded, that led Stevens to ponder the question of what the term “music” must mean to the modernist: “‘[Y]esterday . . . music meant . . . metrical poetry.’” But now there was a change in the very “‘nature of what we mean by music’” (qtd. on 204).

The enlistment of Eliot was what enabled Stevens’ articulation of his version of Louis Zukofsky’s notion that at the upper limit of poetry is

music (A 138), at the lower limit speech, whereas both latter poets aspired to the upper limit but refused to write songs (while, it can be added, Eliot moved progressively down toward speech). I do not claim that Buttel consciously or even unconsciously suppressed this Zukofskian side of Stevens, which has in turn shaped at least two generations of poets whose concept of the sound of words is central to their use of the modernist legacy. But I do suggest that Buttel, one of the sanest of early Stevens critics, seeking “inescapable rhythms” and tracking Stevens’ idea that there had been a “change in the nature of what we mean by music” in poetry, might have felt he would soon reach a critical dead end.

Provocative interventions have been made here and there, such as Marie Borroff’s analysis of the acoustic and articulatory sound symbolism in “The Plot Against the Giant,” a focus fundamental to the later development of Eleanor Cook’s intrepid work on word-play (she found and described all those “ithy oonts”). Notwithstanding these eccentric critical moments, the line of continuity seemed to most critics, including Buttel, to be moving off elsewhere, especially as the Stevensian quality of objectivist poetics had not yet been much recognized. The fate of doing something critically unrecognizable here is, to me, exactly parallel to the dreaded fate of language-only aestheticism that from the 1920s through the early 1960s—in Yvor Winters’ line about nonsense, Robert Frost’s wisecrack about bric-a-brac, Randall Jarrell’s complaint about aural junk-collecting—was deemed an unfortunate and unredeeming approach to the poetics. It would not do to have the emphasis on sound set Stevens’ readers squirming, for implicitly the first major project was to make the poems accessible, further from rather than closer to nonsense. The Stevens relevant to contemporary poets (and here I am going to take extreme examples from among writers never thought of as deriving from the Stevensian aesthetic) such as Kenneth Goldsmith or Tan Lin, both of whom often operate in ambient language—words arranged as to be analogous to sound already in the environment—is the Stevens who strives at times to “undo the traditional work of polyphonic harmony” and makes “moves toward a monotony, a dead unison.” This is the little-appreciated Stevens who responds with beautiful uncreativity to Wittgenstein’s assertion that “A tune is a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself”—the Stevens whose words are sometimes a “semiotically dirty, mumbled smattering over the possibility” of a vowel, such as /o/.

The phrases quoted in the previous two sentences were not from Goldsmith or Lin, but from an essay by, of all poets, John Hollander (250–51). One of the keenest early pieces on sound in Stevens was indeed authored by Hollander, a writer of sonorous, formally lyric lines, very nearly an anti-modernist (although Joyce was his earliest influence), generally associated with traditional poetics—a poet not at all in the Pound–Williams–objectivist nexus. (Hollander is often said by mainstream critics to be writing in the Stevensian tradition, but in the supposed Auden side of that mode.<sup>2</sup>)

Many young scholars of modern and contemporary poetry were trying to resist the “Whose era is it? Stevens or Pound” dichotomy even before Marjorie Perloff stated the case for this key literary-historical binarism thus in 1982. Taking up Hollander’s cause seemed to cede the language ground to Pound and made sound-in-Stevens criticism unfashionable at best, irrelevant at worst. In 1981, as my handwritten notes on a photocopy of “The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound” indicate, before even reading it closely I filed away the Hollander piece and conducted my own research and writing on Stevens (for a book that made a political reading of a politically unconscious modernist) without the benefit of its insights. There it was nonetheless, a critically incorrect, yet large and fundamental—and super-obvious—claim: “The whole of ‘The Whole of Harmonium’ [Stevens’ term for his overall poetic project, the continuous poetic] is a musical trope” (235). I wrote a thirteen-page interpretation of “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz” and “Mozart, 1935,” describing a counter-politics against the lyric made in verse using music as a trope, without consulting this essay (*Modernism from Right to Left* 206–19). That a critic such as Hollander works as a poet at the Frostian end of the spectrum of Stevensian phrasing (and sense of nature) kept me from hearing the fitness of the critic’s sense that sounds apparently external to the poet, such as the be-thouing romantic bird, were “asserting their own exemplariness” through words as auralities. Missing the musical forest for the literary-political trees, lured down a single path formed by straight and narrow rather than crisscrossed aesthetic taxonomies, hearing talk of sound but seeing metrical traditionalism, I overlooked the clear assertion that “Frost and Stevens would make *very different things* of th[e] observation” offered by George Santayana that “‘To hear is almost to understand’ ” (Hollander 247; italics added).

Hi Simons, the first to ask Stevens in any sort of systematic way about the sound of words, was an amateur critic. He was unconfident and awed, critically a plodding workaholic, star-struck around Stevens’ replies to his letters, and aware of his own tendency to believe utterly whatever Stevens said. As he told a close friend of Stevens’, who in turn told Stevens: “I work so slowly that I am constantly embarrassed about it. . . . I often doubt that I possess that ability to carry water on both shoulders which Mr. Stevens cultivated so successfully . . . twenty-five years ago” (letter to Arthur Powell). Simons was an independent critic whose daily life was consumed by his work as a publisher of medical textbooks in Chicago. He seems to have deliberately misled Stevens by continuing to imply for several years that he was preparing a bibliography even well beyond the point of posing merely bibliographical questions. Their earliest exchanges, beginning in 1938, were all about tracking Stevens’ old appearances in periodicals, but soon letters arrived from Chicago requesting line-by-line close readings. A number of them asked directly or indirectly about the meaning of the sounds words make—for Simons ever the most difficult aspect of the verse to apprehend. Stevens’ replies show that he was aware of Simons’

awe, and his letters—saying for instance that the meaning of “The Comedian as the Letter C” was in the sound of the letter C—were sometimes toneless yet overstated, sometimes oddly ironic, and occasionally just shy of toying with the rookie close reader. Alternatively, they were literalistic in the extreme. Once Stevens began to hear (first from others, then, confessionally, from Simons himself) that his self-effacing correspondent was hoping to write a huge critical biography—“an affair . . . larger than Horton’s work on Crane, something like Foster Damon’s on Amy Lowell” (letter from Harry Duncan), a prospect horrifying to Stevens, who hated the idea of biographical readings—the poet’s answers to the critic’s request for detailed response seemed ironically to bear out, rather than to contradict, his principle against authorial explanations as he described this tenet to Simons directly: “I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed” (L 346). Or, more bluntly when the critic’s questions were about a poem whose form turns on the limits of words as sounds, “A paraphrase like this is a sort of murder” (L 360).

Here the homicide victim was “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” The question Simons posed about unreality in canto XVIII of this thirty-three-canto poem might well have led Stevens to discuss how the sound made by the “sea of ex” negates the negation of intelligible language in the poem. The canto is a dream of the sort that defies the term “dream” (“to call it a dream” is the best we can do). The rest is repetition, words crossing the senses (the guitarist’s “long strumming on certain nights / Gives the touch of the senses, not of the hand”) such that the thing, the idea of the thing in the phrase “things as they are,” is lost in the ringing of repeated, modulated phrasing: “A *dream* no longer a *dream*, a *thing*, / Of *things* as they *are*, as the blue guitar” (143; italics added).

Thus “ex” marks a poetic spot beyond sounded sense-making, a place toward which the poem’s language drifts. Yet, especially if we have read Simons’ letter (unpublished, housed at the Huntington Library), we can see in Stevens’ reply that he knew he needed first to help his correspondent make basic sense of the exclusive visual scene, so that the “sense of ir-reality often in the presence of morning light on cliffs when they rise from the sea” (letter to Hi Simons) engages image by analogy as a didactic tool. Impressionism here is an *analogy* to ir-reality, not a theme of the poem, nor its aesthetic ideology or mode. The canto uses the sound of words to stipulate ir-reality too. Yet the brief explanation, published in *Letters* without, of course, the incoming letter from Simons, or the context of the imbalanced power relationship, seems definitive. There are at least a dozen similar readings. The same confusion, for instance, seems to derive from Stevens’ answers to Simons’ queries about the Arabian in the room in canto III of the “It Must Be Abstract” section of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” In the margin of Simons’ incoming letter, next to the question as posed, Stevens wrote this in pencil: “The Arabian in the room & the unscrawled

fores (the vagueness—undecipherable)—is the moonlight” (letter to Simons). He was hardly avoiding the centrality of the “chant.” He was by no means now deaf to the “damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how” (331). He was literally responding to what he thought Simons needed to get along section by section in this epic.

The Stevens community seems to have been thrown off the scent of sound by this exchange for at least two decades, even before Holly Stevens’ edition of letters was published in 1966, because stories of the poet’s detailed explications for Simons and partial quotations circulated among inner-circle critics, promulgated by Holly Stevens and Samuel French Morse, among others (Filreis interview with Morse). Sound got off to a bad critical start, beginning with the way in which the aural excesses of “The Comedian as the Letter C” were read and taught based on a contextless understanding of Stevens’ relationship with the man who first received the seemingly definitive answer to questions about the momentousness of the sound of the letter C.

Notwithstanding the importance of aural abecedarianism, Stevens, in public readings, “threw away all the great lines,” so that his audiences felt “it was almost painful at times” to hear him (Brazeau 167). Without a microphone, even in a small room, “his voice barely carried beyond the third or fourth row.” At Yale in 1948, a woman raised her hand and asked if the poet could “‘speak more loudly? I can’t hear a thing.’” Stevens answered: “‘I’ll try, lady. I’ll try’” (Brazeau 172). That Stevens was such an incapable and apparently indifferent reader of his own poetry at public readings has obviously not helped the cause of sound. Interviews Peter Brazeau conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s with people who attended these readings suggest that the poet’s inability created a general impression that he did not value the heard poem. Yet more eagerly than one might expect, given these disastrous readings and his temperamental shyness, he assented to radio performances and, crucially, to recording his poems at Harvard’s “Poetry Room” in Lamont Library, where his friend James Johnson Sweeney presided over a growing archive of reel-to-reel tape recordings, now the important George Edward Woodberry Poetry Room Collection. Bernard Heringman, who heard Stevens in public twice—once at Princeton in 1941 and a second time at MoMA in 1951—noticed that Stevens on such occasions “assumed a very sophisticated audience” (Brazeau 199), and perhaps that was his chief mistake. Some of the Lamont session was reproduced on a Caedmon vinyl LP (later sold on cassette), and this is the sound of Stevens’ voice most of us know: metrically emphatic, slow, belaboring pauses, and monotonous. Yet one could argue that Stevens’ problem as a reader was that he paid too little attention, rather than too much, to verse as it is expected to sound like verse. Indeed, now that discussions of poetry and poetics do not start from an assumption that a *poetic* voice is per se distinct from other kinds of writing read aloud, it seems time to return to these (and other, less well known and perhaps unknown) record-

ings. Heringman remembered, when Stevens at MoMA “switched from prose to poetry,” that “it was hard for a moment to tell the difference” (Brazeau 199); turning this to the advantage of aural poetics might be a good starting point rather than an impediment.

In the preface to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein describes the book—a collection of essays on the poetics of sound and performed poetry, the audiotext in general—as “a call for a non-Euclidean . . . prosody for the many poems for which traditional prosody does not apply” (4). He is thinking here not just of poets for whom audio recordings survive but of those, modern and contemporary, whose aesthetic will be understood differently through the new emphasis on digital poetics and sound poetry. The more seriously we take Borroff’s idea of the relevance of acoustic and articulatory sound symbolism to Stevens’ prosody, the more we return to our files to find unread essays such as Hollander’s, the more capable we are (through archival and biographical research) to read past misperceptions caused by the poet’s misleading explanations of the sound of words, the less likely critics are to worry about the mannerist dead end and the greater the chance that Stevens’ poetics will be part of the discussion of the non-Euclidean prosody augured by the new ubiquitous availability, through PennSound and other projects, of recordings of the poets’ vocalized—as distinct from read—sounds. For the moment, though, Stevens has been left out.

In a large sense, it is true that our theoretical—and also practical—interest in technologies of recorded sound has been slower to develop than that of the modernist poets themselves, who after all worked with “words at the borders of sense . . . in a new world of music[] and voices,” as Peter Middleton phrases it in this issue (78). Yet more specifically it is also the case that the essays in Bernstein’s *Close Listening* mention Vachel Lindsay, Robert Creeley, H. D., Hugh MacDiarmid, W. B. Yeats, Kenneth Rexroth, Langston Hughes, John Ashbery, Gertrude Stein, Kurt Schwitters, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Laura Riding, Robert Graves, and Pound, Eliot, and Zukofsky, but in all 390 pages of the book there is not a single even passingly substantive reference to Wallace Stevens.<sup>3</sup> Nor is Stevens at all a part of the discussion in *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, a book edited by Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss, and yet most of the contributors are people steeped in modern poetry, and, although the focus is often on recent poetry created for one digital medium or another, the referential and literary-historical base is modernism, such that discussions of Ashbery, Apollinaire, Borges, Brecht, Bob Brown, Coleridge, Creeley, Freud, Joyce, Olson, George Oppen, Picasso, Pound, Stein, Carl Van Vechten, Whitman, and Williams befit the augured new poetics and make apparently good critical sense; but Stevens does not.

Perhaps Stevens’ absence may easily be explained as one of those iterative academic phenomena of cross-citation (critics referring to each other’s

references) that Diana Crane has described for the social sciences: a critic deemed even just momentarily valuable is cited by others trying to draw from an aura, naming the names named by the prized critic, after which mutual referencing proliferates. The new intellectual and aesthetic passion for the sounded and performed poetic word is more significant than that, but to the extent that it does function like Crane's "invisible college," it is damage fairly easily repaired. If Stevens is at present not cool enough to be counted among the modernist aural "lingualisualists"—to borrow a term Edwin Torres uses to identify the poet whose poem puts "the eye that is the ear in the back of the brain" (19)—then one practical solution might be for Stevens critics to begin dropping him into the indexes of such volumes. But cynical tactics are hardly necessary. A case for explaining Stevens' disappearance from discussions of the sound of the modern word can be made, as I am outlining it here, but the thwarting of a positive argument is nonetheless a complicated matter and seems to me associated with the failure of the social reading given Stevens in the late 1980s and 1990s, a trend of which I was a part.

Finally, then, I can only begin to suggest a flaw in that trend. I introduced the problem above, as my sixth reason why sound in Stevens has fallen behind, thus: "a certain deafness in the project of disclosing Stevens' politics." Those of us who have tried to make manifest the political life of an apparently unpolitical poet found the requirements of the project were so daunting—and involved, as critical writing, so much primary exposition—that we had to make short work of sound in readings of poems where the music of words is obviously central, such as "Mozart, 1935" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Not that readings of sound-sense would have negated the political re-interpretation—on the contrary—but I at least sidestepped the element these poems add: for one thing, the social resistance, in its own right, that nonsense ("Its shoo-shoo-shoo" [107]) represents; for another, the significance of the climactic moment of a dialogic political narrative—in the apparently forgettable meager canto XX of "The Man with the Blue Guitar." It is an eight-line poem of fifty-four words. Of these fifty-four, just ten are *not* repeated in verse that gives the effect of minimalist music, what Helen Vendler rightly calls "The monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar" (124).

What is there in life . . .  
 Good air, good friend, what is there in life?

Is it ideas that I believe?  
 Good air, my only friend, believe,

Believe would be . . .  
 . . . believe would be a friend,

Friendlier than my only friend,  
Good air. (144)

And it ends thus: "Poor pale, poor pale guitar . . ." (144), just at a moment when the poem might have ceased into aural despondency (instead of going on for thirteen more cantos). It is a crucial modulation in the sound of the verse, but also in the political life of the whole poem, where, with the word "guitar" (itself a strummed downbeat), we return to the titular thematic term *referring* to the *idea* of improvisation, yet here, rendered as a purely struck iamb, it is itself the improvisation. At such a moment if the ear does not deal with the sound of the poem as and at an impasse, it will be deaf to Stevens' enacted commentary on contemporary poetics. The end of canto XX is an almost total collapse of social sense-making, a lyric whose political argument—Does the social realist "left" or the aesthetic high modernist "right" lay better claim to the legacy of the revolution of the word?—is reduced to the mere sound of the argued words. The ideological left-right, them-vs.-guitarist, back-and-forth technique is carried so far as to come "near the utmost edge of intelligibility" (Vendler 124). And that is precisely where sound picks up the story that content left off.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 307. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number only in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup>Hollander's *Picture Window* was said to "combine[] a reader-friendly alertness with intellectual sophistication" reminiscent of Stevens and W. H. Auden both, because in essence "his poems try 'to make words be themselves' " (*Publisher's Weekly*). Another review of the same book saw Stevens and Coleridge in Hollander's "cleverly constructed and philosophically agile poem[s]" (Seaman).

<sup>3</sup>Twice Stevens' name is given in a list, once by Jed Rasula (there Stevens is on the wrong side of a divide between aurally canonical poets and those whose voices need to be recovered [235]) and again in Peter Middleton's history of the poetry reading (Stevens is mentioned as one of "among nearly a hundred other" poets published in a 1921 anthology [284]). Rasula does, in a sentence (251), quote Stevens' "Man Carrying Thing" in order to put into his argument the oft-quoted point, "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (306).

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