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The Stevens Wars

Al Filreis

In the house the house is all
house and each of its authors
passing from room to room

Short eclogues as one might
say on tiptoe do not infringe
—Susan Howe, *118 Westerly Terrace*

Howe's poem, its title bearing Wallace Stevens's suburban street address, takes us as far as one can imagine from the Stevens whom we (up through at least 1972) thought barely hid his secret French Symbolist identity and who in the poems would always apparently rather be elsewhere.¹ Collected in *The Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), Howe's thirty-six-page homage to Stevens appears there with an intent that bespeaks the Stevens she reveres: native to, not alienated from, an American psychic past of utopian quietist sects, Jonathan Edwardism, and "history qua history"; dwell-

1. The project to make Stevens French culminated in Michel Benamou's *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

ing upon instead of repressing a poetics that meets at "antithetical cross-roads" and produces the "loose ramshackle / extract poem" rather than merely the ironic ditty that leaves its traces only as a passing early phase of Anglo-American modernism.²

Any consideration of what has happened to Stevens since the mid-seventies must eventually return to Howe, but for now it suffices to say something about the way *118 Westerly Terrace* culminates a general though disorganized project: many poets, including some otherwise unlike Howe, who are devoted readers of Stevens, see historical magic in the poetics of everyday life: the quiet house on a weekday evening, the reader in his chair, the large man made out of words, the sullen Old School Modern sitting at the end of his bed in the vestige of dream, the figure of capable imagination bathed in the ordinariness that can induce the quiet suburban night to rear up suddenly in a "Rabbit as King of the Ghosts." That edge space he tried to write into writing—between dawn and day as between language and being, between thinking and composing, between irony and rumination, between being here (in the poem) and being displaced—is often, in the stanzas, a description of the scene of composition that serves as the starting point for fecund flights of what Stevens in the 1940s and Stevensians from 1950 through the midseventies incessantly called "the imagination" (as supposedly distinct from "reality"). Radical feelings of dislocation can arise from situatedness. Dennis Barone, an experimental prose writer and poet who happens to live in West Hartford, where Stevens did, has reproduced this sense in the words and phrases he chose for his own recent poem "An Ordinary Evening" (2006), modeled on Stevens's great late poem of slow serial style, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949). Here are some of Barone's words: "empty," "quiet," "large," "slightly," "nothing remains," "dried out," "sits," "awaits," "dreams," "stretches forth," "distant," again "slightly."³ Most of the poems written by contemporary poets that overtly pay homage to Stevens comprehend a disaffected intensity—somewhat itself a typical modernist tone—and frame and formalize it with the sheer verbal excitements of admitting into the poem traces of the domestic space in which the act of writing occurs, the latter a postmodern mode Stevens perfected a few years before John Ashbery began writing maturely and a generation before Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* disjunctively rendered the American home.

2. Susan Howe, *118 Westerly Terrace*, in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 53.

3. Dennis Barone, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 31, no. 2 (2007): 198–99.

Notwithstanding these later effects, the Stenvensean disaffection has been a marvel, since it tends to prohibit definitive legacy. Had such a stance not thwarted obvious influence, I suspect the field would never have become so wide open that Howe could now, after all these years of admiration, place Stevens onto the Labadie tract uncontroversially. Stevens after 1975 has been, to be sure, a going concern, yet his effect on poetics has been diffuse and nearly unidentifiable on the whole. The figure of the man in the room in the house, or striding arrhythmically to the office, or sitting in the park, is itself sufficiently unfocused in an affection for mundane things—yet at once distrusts thingy poets as merely social and clings with surprising partisanship to abstraction—as to enable poetic identities across the literary-political and theoretical landscape. Reading poetry magazines, blogs, and reviews, one feels Stevens is everywhere but also nowhere. Modernist claims about locality, in for instance poems like “Description without Place” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” make an act much harder to follow than, say, William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*: noncollaged, all series and no essence, abstract yet full of referential bric-a-brac, radically displaced yet apparently eschewing political position.

If Stevens can seem anything to everyone, perhaps that is as it should be—the style generative, the figurations of the poet various. I can locate the posthumous Stevens as the tragic composer (in David St. John’s poem “Symphonie Tragique”⁴), as the impressionistic landscape colorist (in Charles Tomlinson’s “Suggestions for the Improvement of a Sunset”⁵), as once again the man made of words (in R. S. Thomas’s “Homage to Wallace Stevens”⁶), as the avowed urbanist (in Lewis Turco’s “An Ordinary Evening in Cleveland”⁷), and as the meditative midnighter by the suburban window hearing in night’s voices “[a]ll the oblique ruins of the unsaid” (in Ann Lauterbach’s “Annotation,” a brilliant replication of Stevens’s diction). “The room behind the room,” writes Lauterbach,

Has lost its particularity, a tent
In a field of tents.

4. David St. John, “Symphonie Tragique,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 27–29.

5. Charles Tomlinson, “Suggestions for the Improvement of a Sunset,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 6.

6. R. S. Thomas, “Homage to Wallace Stevens,” in *Collected Later Poems: 1988–2000* (Highgreen, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), 266.

7. Lewis Turco, “An Ordinary Evening in Cleveland,” in *Fearful Pleasures: The Complete Poems, 1959–2007* (Scottsdale, Ariz.: Star Cloud Press, 2007), 66–69.

These are like the endings of words
 As rooms resemble the beginnings.⁸

Morri Creech's Stevens leads him to a room, too—to the bed in which, in the Dantesque terza rima stanza of "The World as Meditation," Stevens imagined the subject position of Penelope sleepily and passionately imagining Ulysses' return, which she (and he—Stevens) can only conjure through a half-waking state. Creech, a formalist in the manner of Anthony Hecht (he was the first recipient of the Hecht Award) and much praised by poetic conservatives, rewrites through "The World as Meditation" Primo Levi's reminiscence of "The Canto of Ulysses" in Auschwitz, recalled from the survivor's bed back home in Turin. Stevens's Penelope awaits Ulysses, but meantime the "patient syllables" of the poem itself enable her to survive alone, just as syllabic reductions of love can console us; on the other hand, Creech's Levi dreads and needs the return of the poem of Ulysses at Auschwitz as the linguistic gesture that once saved him but now dooms him, while Stevens's fictive frame must provide the dreamy domestic bed scene.⁹

The Stevens in Robert Bly's heroic poem "Wallace Stevens' Letters" is a man hard to love, and *thus* beloved: "stiff and stern and almost like a hero."¹⁰ Stevens after Stevens is also sometimes merely an antipoetic influence to be awed, as in Richard Eberhart's verse-memory of drinking pitchers of martinis with the big poet in his habitual lunchtime inn ("At the Canoe Club"), in which the recollected "jaunty tone, a task of banter, rills / In mind, an opulence agreed upon"¹¹ of such drunken two-hour repasts is found absolutely nowhere in the poetics of the homage itself. (Talk about disaffection! Talk about anxiety of influence!) We also often find the businessman-poet who enjoyed a good income but then also contemplated money's strangely rich idiomatic life, as in Dana Gioia's clever synonym-generating satire called "Money," a formalist's riff on Stevens's politically indecipherable mantra, "Money is a kind of poetry."¹²

The Stevens we discern in homages and imitations ranges from the Hopperesque purveyor of hard flat American shapes and surfaces (in

8. Ann Lauterbach, "Annotation," in *Clamor* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 34.

9. Morri Creech, "The Canto of Ulysses," in *Field Knowledge* (Baltimore, Md.: Waywiser Press, 2006), 21–22.

10. Robert Bly, "Wallace Stevens' Letters," in *Gratitude to Old Teachers* (Brockport, N.Y.: Boa, 1993), 8.

11. Richard Eberhart, "At the Canoe Club," in *Collected Poems, 1930–1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 217.

12. Dana Gioia, "Money," in *The Gods of Winter* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1991), 33.

Tony Quagliano's "Edward Hopper's *Lighthouse at Two Lights*, 1927"¹³) to the theorist of nothingness who makes us think with fecundity (in Jerome Sala's "The Model Summer"¹⁴), from the fussy middle-aged man with the tropical imagination (Lisa Steinman's "Wallace Stevens in the Tropics"¹⁵) to the atomistic language philosopher in Michael Palmer's lyric on "linear inquiry." Palmer's preferred Stevens is the purveyor of logical-philosophical propositions, the deliberately unrigorous Wittgenstein of "Connoisseur of Chaos": "A. A violent order is disorder; and / B. A great disorder is an order. These / Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.)"¹⁶ Here is Palmer:

[Let *a* be taken as . . .]
 a liquid line beneath the skin
 and *b* where the blue tiles meet
 body and the body's bridge
 a seeming road here, endless . . .¹⁷

This homage is at once a philosophical investigation—that is, into the poetic language of philosophy—and a love poem, a final soliloquy with an interior paramour. Its words are the result of "the project of seeing things" in the *ding an sich* manner of *Parts of a World* (1942), poems like "The Poems of Our Climate," "Prelude to Objects," and "Study of Two Pears." Palmer's Stevensesan epistemology runs this way:

things seen
 namely a hand, namely
 the logic of the hand
 holding a bell or clouded lens
 the vase perched impossibly near the edge
 obscuring the metal tin

Charles Bernstein has rewritten "Loneliness in Jersey City" (1938) as "Loneliness in Linden" (2008), reconstituting the prewar immigrant-filled

13. Tony Quagliano, "Edward Hopper's *Lighthouse at Two Lights*, 1927," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 62–63.

14. Jerome Sala, "The Model Summer," in *Visiting Wallace: Poem Inspired by the Life and Work of Wallace Stevens* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009). This poem was composed in 2008 for Dennis Barone and James Finnegan.

15. Lisa Steinman, "Wallace Stevens in the Tropics," in *Visiting Wallace*.

16. Wallace Stevens, "Connoisseur of Chaos," in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (Washington D.C.: Library of America, 1997), 194.

17. Michael Palmer, *Notes for Echo Lake* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Point Press, 1981), 58–60.

American city with more direct foreboding of the coming annihilation of these people's Old Country relatives. In Stevens, "Polacks . . . pass in their motors / And play concertinas all night. / They think that things are all right." Bernstein does not contradict so much as point up the irony of such playfulness through another layer of irony pulling at Stevens's apparently political unconscious, Linden being a place "Where Jews do Jewish things" and "No one pretends to understand" what happens "When the fear and the hum are one." Bernstein plays upon the difference/not-difference between two industrial working-class New Jersey cities, such that readers will not easily perceive the extent to which the satire is set against the ideologically savvy yet anti-Semitic Stevens; and the poem is either literally or literally *and* aesthetically "After Wallace Stevens."¹⁸

Lytle Shaw has the distilled cadences of Stevensesan rhetoric in his head as Bernstein does. A devotee of Frank O'Hara who sensed that "the epistemological dilemmas that [Stevens's] work as a whole explores (of which "The Snow Man" is one of the best examples) gets replayed in a bit of an overly consistent way," Shaw has written through the utterly familiar diction and cadence of that set-piece in a prose poem called "The Confessions 2" (2002), in which, as "mind of winter" becomes "mine of copper," the geopolitical setting changes while all rhetorical traces are followed: "One would have to have a mine of copper, and have been cold to the union's safety and wage pleas for a long while, and perhaps have amassed a cabinet of classical artifacts in a sound proof basement displayed on custom aluminum mesh grids, or to have run for several city offices. . . ."¹⁹ As with Bernstein, the poem seems to offer an ironic reversal of Stevensesan social positioning while perfectly and respectfully rhyming Stevens's rhetoric in such a way as to affirm his politics of form.

In today's Stevensesan poetry, one too frequently discerns Stevens the modernist who has gotten so completely under the later poet's skin that pure satire, for instance in Mark DeFoe's "13 Ways of Eradicating Blackbirds," seems the only poetic recourse, a dead end. Here is DeFoe's seventh epigram:

Dye yourself black. Whirl about wildly, thrash,
Flap, chirp, and tweet like a demented lark.²⁰

18. Stevens, "Loneliness in Jersey City," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 191. Charles Bernstein, "Loneliness in Linden," *Conjunctions* 50 (Spring 2008): 112.

19. Lytle Shaw, "The Confessions 2," in *The Lobe* (New York: Roof Books, 2002).

20. Mark DeFoe, "13 Ways of Eradicating Blackbirds," *Epoch*, no. 28 (Spring 1978): 281.

Such parodies (I could quote a dozen) tend to riff on a single poem, quick-take attempts at posing in a particular ironic position, one abandoned as quickly as assumed. These satires convey a Stevensean manner and do not entirely lack interest, but ultimately the measure of Stevens's sustained effect is better assessed in the writing of poets who seek to contemplate "the whole of harmonium," a term he used to support an insistence that his work was a single worthy but finally doubtful project, a *Cantos* under many titles, a flawed and not finally constructed edifice, a "greenhouse [that] never so badly needed paint," a "great structure . . . become a minor house."²¹ In "Thinking of Wallace Stevens," Robert Creeley, a strong poet if ever there was one, faced a predecessor whose overall aesthetic sensibility was so rhetorically overwhelming that one could not help but fall into a demotic yet abstract Stevensean vocabulary, thus "mak[ing] all acquiesce to one's preeminent premise." There's an almost Bloomian anxiety of influence affecting Creeley here, awakened frighteningly, I think, in a writer whose ample fierceness is rarely reserved for others among the poetic company and who explicitly—along with Jerome Rothenberg—despised Harold Bloom's romantic-psychoanalytic theory of agony in the literary community. Yet here Creeley protests too much, in uncharacteristic verse: "No one can know me better than myself." Such a negatively imagined disaster of poetic selfhood is followed by meditative unrhymed couplets right out of the late Stevens, where slowness, dullness, age, and an "almost ancient proximity" (Creeley's phrase) lead to the exhilarating near-final realization that (in Stevens's formulation) "the end of the imagination had itself to be imagined." Here are two of Creeley's Stevensean couplets:

The candle flickers in the quick, shifting wind.
It reads the weather wisely in the opened window.

So it is the dullness of mind one cannot live without,
This place returned to, this place that was never left.²²

When Creeley is "thinking" of this figure, he fails to choose between a languagey Stevens and a meditative Stevens, such that one never really knows what the "preeminent premise" is. Is it that linguistic identity constructs human subjectivity, that the "c" precedes both chorister and choir (to use the trope of "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself")? Or

21. Stevens, "The Plain Sense of Things," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 428.

22. "Thinking of Wallace Stevens," in *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1975–2005* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 428.

is it that the figure in the poems is part of nature and thus, also, in that sense, a part of us—a person, a human figure operating behind the poem, writing to us in various yet wholly associated states and moods, insistently “alive” and “at a table” (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”), telling us of a life consistently lived just at the point when we have begun to doubt such wholeness?

The poems of Stevens do not come down on one side of this question, and yet it is the question that has dominated poetics in the past three decades. The various explanatory gestures in Stevens's poems, essays, and lectures, and in memos and letters about the Supreme Fiction and other such concepts, seem of little direct help to us now. Reading across a hundred recent poems following from or inspired by him, we see that his style, reckoned in the era after which affiliation with social problems made a productive peace with process-oriented writing, functions variously but, again, inconclusively. And so again advocates of Stevens's relevance to contemporary poetics have seemed disorganized—have not for the most part felt the need to form *that* community among so many others that serve the purpose of asserting the lineage back through modernism. It is not necessary that they break or be broken into camps. Indeed, were the Stevensesan mode to function in contemporary poetics as the Poundian has from around 1950 until recently, the polarization might contradict its greatest effects. Still, the only useful function of the critic in this situation is to give some broad shape to the sides in an argument that is not being waged except here and there through skirmishes in which the antagonists can thus claim that other matters are at stake. The lack of contestation ipso facto means that one side has won the argument; the indifferent aspect of the discussion itself tends to permit the meditative, unagonistic Stevens to carry the day. Preparing to write this essay, I gathered together 120 poems operating in some way under the sign of Stevens; the majority are explicit responses.²³ I then forced myself to divide them into two rude yet perhaps indicative categories. The first Stevens discernible here is the ruminative poet, essentially romantic although often cleverly dubbed “post-Romantic.” The subject's pronoun can be vague—a plural “we” or a dissociative “one,” sometimes the third-person personal “he” as the speaker—but is always consistent. The speaker is a poet-figure evolving over the course of poems: a modern person always on the verge of, but finally doubtful of, natural

23. In this I was aided by an excellent gathering edited by Dennis Barone and James Finnegan, *Visiting Wallace: Poem Inspired by the Life and Work of Wallace Stevens* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), for which I have written the foreword.

description; a romantic situation observed at the point where subjectivity qualifies realism. For many who admire the meditative-lyric Stevens, the sensibility is post-Christian; "Sunday Morning" is a poem for starters. When biography is engaged, Santayana's influence becomes a reference point. Additionally or alternatively, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942)—arguably Stevens's major programmatic poem—if read in a certain way, presents the developed idea (that in modernity the aesthetic has replaced divinity). A much later poem, "Not Ideas about the Thing" (1952), can be said to express the final subjectivist's regret as the sound of the world out there is, in the end, prelinguistic and externally real. Language is not the final thing; the thing itself is. The late sedentary poems are an allure, as power-of-imagination lyrics, such as "The World as Meditation," "Questions Are Remarks," "A Postcard from the Volcano," and "The Men That Are Falling." Poems of recollection, for instance "The Poem That Took the Place of the Mountain," are not so much deemed metapoems, poems about poetics, as romantic high-view retrospectives of the personal landscape the poems form, a footing or purchase gained on a life observed. His effect is conservative—as a conservator of values associated traditionally with lyric. "His major poetry," wrote John Hollander—that "elegant romantic" who on Stevens's birthday in 1975 was said to have "one distinguished American predecessor: Stevens"²⁴—"energetically engaged the task of preserving our cardinal nobilities from decay into trivialization and into mockeries of what they had been."²⁵ Stevens becomes a conservative modernist standing against modernist excess. If Stevens was "one the very greatest of our poets in a century during which the loudest of assertions had started to ring false," then the truth would sound in the "reverberating" lyricism, verse that does not make truculent, discordant claims but rather "eke[s] out the mind," forming "the particulars of sound."²⁶ Thus for advocates of the meditative-lyric Stevens, the key poetic unit is the line.

Distinct from all this is what might be roughly called a languaged Stevens: theoretical, serial, and nonnarrative, metapoetically radical, sometimes satirical (and *antinarrative*), always obsessive about the state of poetics and insisting on consciousness of the compositional mode as

24. Donald Davie, "Gifts of the Gab," *New York Review of Books*, October 2, 1975, 30–31.

25. John Hollander, "To Reinvent Invention: John Hollander on Wallace Stevens," *American Poet* 17 (Spring 2000): 14.

26. Hollander, "To Reinvent Invention," 14. Hollander was quoting Stevens's "The Creations of Sound," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 274.

itself a pressure inducing the poem to be composed. This Stevens offers a theory of rhetoric in which the poem does the work that the poem generally contends such a poem should or must do. The poems speak in a rhetoric of rhetoric while enacting rhetoric's general centrality. Stevens here is no conservator of lyric tradition, no defender against decay, trivialization, or mock. The serial or seriatic style—early in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” more maturely in “Notes,” “Description without Place,” “Esthetique du Mal,” “Things of August,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” “An Ordinary Evening”—actually befits rather than rejects the cyclonic modernist historical modes adopted early and briefly by Eliot, grandly and insistently by Pound, and later by Williams. The work of reading history in the post-*Pisan* cantos and in Stevens's longer poems of the mid- and late 1940s involves a surprisingly similar critical reading activity. That Stevens offers a way of understanding a particularly American kind of poetic historiography or philosophical concept of what it is to be historical is, I think, the primary cause of Howe's great devotion to him, as most clearly disclosed in *118 Westerly Terrace*. Many, although not all, contemporary poets who are coming to admire the languaged Stevens—not Howe in this particular aspect; but Bernstein, yes—commence their affection with the antic, parodic, and self-parodic poems of *Harmonium* and other works in that mode that appear again, with a bit more gloom under the satire, in the mid- and especially late 1930s (for example, “Loneliness in Jersey City,” “Anything Is Beautiful If You Say It Is,” “Cuisine Bourgeoise”). This poetics is contingent but not psychological—unrevealing. The poem is the mind in the act of finding what will suffice, but what will suffice is not mind but language. The man made out of words is words. And the words (stanzas in unconsecutive series) seem to move in their own direction.

In recent years, Stevens's long poems have been permitted the reputation of their directionlessness, but this had not always been so. In the mid-1960s, avant-garde poets who might have included Stevens in their advocacy of serial writing did not merely leave him unmentioned but believed in a conservative antimodernist academic conspiracy to possess the soul of the Stevensesan poetic. For three minutes in the middle of Jack Spicer's second of three famous June 1965 lectures in Vancouver—this second talk was about the concept of the serial poem, and gave Spicer a platform for commending such a method arising out of the Spicer/Blaser/Duncan con-fabulation—a surprising discussion about Stevens interrupted the flow. An audience member asked Spicer if he considered “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” a serial poem. Spicer, after hesitating quite a bit, thought not:

Stevens had had a plan and had stuck to it, even if he had allowed himself to wander in the middle. But, the questioner observed, Stevens at various times had said about that poem just what Spicer was now saying about the serial poem generally. "If you have a nice map," was Spicer's rejoinder, "and you want to get from here to the north tip of Vancouver Island, then it sort of isn't the same thing as if you just sail out there and don't know where you want to go, and let the wind carry you." The questioner persisted, though, asking about "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Spicer began to take the point. Stevens *did* write serially, and Spicer conceded that the poems of *Transport to Summer* might at least be considered "*edited serial*" poetry. But then a second thought and a turn toward a vague but powerful institutional rationale for Stevens's absence from such avant-garde talk: "I don't know," said Spicer after another moment. "The awful thing about Stevens is that everybody in English departments who hates poetry, which is just about everybody [*laughter*], loves Stevens [*more laughter*]. You know it really . . . I liked Stevens a great deal more before I saw that. . . . There's just a real hatred. They always like Stevens. All of these people. The more they hate poetry [the more] they like Stevens, so although Stevens moves me I've gotten more distrustful of him."²⁷

Today's much-admired meditative Stevens descends in part from the antimodernist academic assimilation of the Stevens whose modernist language and epic wandering are suppressed in such a move—the move Spicer deeply distrusted. That hegemonic stream joined the faction of those in the academic poetry world who wanted their modern poets in a lineage directly running from romanticism but didn't want to engage the modernist-antimodernist battle. What Spicer was doing in 1965 was expressing a willingness to cede the entire ground to such readings—an error, as at least some in Spicer's audience already understood, but one credentialed and well reasoned on the quasi-anarchic poetic left. By 1998, when Peter Gizzi transcribed, edited, and annotated Spicer's Vancouver lectures and expressed his total admiration for the Spicerian project, half the Stevens ground had been taken back. That by then the field had opened is indicated in many ways; one is surely that Gizzi, an energetic advocate of the Stevensesan mode as befitting rather than blocking experimental poetics, could accommodate Spicer's Vancouver advocacy into his aesthetic world

27. I have transcribed these comments directly from the PennSound recording of the June 15, 1965, lecture in Vancouver: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Spicer.html>. Gizzi's edition is: Jack Spicer, *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

without fear of contradiction (or, for that matter, of academic co-optation or, on the contrary, of exile from the avant-garde company).

Gizzi is one of our most important contemporary Stevensesan poets, yet he is adamantly nonideological about it. *Periplum and Other Poems* gathers early work from 1987 to 1992, and Stevens is everywhere, although in the background. Epigraphs from Emily Dickinson, Spicer, James Schuyler, George Oppen, Ashbery, Rainer Maria Rilke, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Keith Waldrop assert the preferred literary company and don't so much suppress the presence of Stevens as express a remnant of outmoded embarrassment (Stevens and *Dickinson*? Stevens and *Oppen*?) and a debt more pervasive than dedications can allow. The great sequence "Music for Films," written in Provincetown in August 1990, looks and sometimes reads like the Oppen of *Discrete Series* but is more interestingly Gizzi's attempt at his own "Variations on a Summer Day" (1940), floating, chartless, using weather as device for directionlessness and (momentary) lack of poetic ambition.

Some Values of Landscape and Weather (2003) is Gizzi's most Stevensesan volume. Again the landscape-and-weather trope provides a means of laconic improvisation, a going which way the wind blows, a subject as a cloud, "imitation[s] of life" that can use terrestrial being as an excuse for impersonality and dislocation. Gizzi here is in Stevens's floating middle period: "Landscape with Boat," "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun," "The Search for Sound Free from Motion," "Forces, the Will & the Weather," "Debris of Life & Mind," even the dour "Yellow Afternoon." The ironic word-level sonority of "A History of the Lyric" has *Harmonium* in it, however:

There are beetles and boojum
Specimen jars decorated

With walkingsticks, water striders
And luna moths

A treatise on rotating spheres.²⁸

Gizzi's whole project might be captured in that phrase: "a treatise on rotating spheres"—what Jordan Davis calls a "shorthand sublimity"²⁹ at the level of the line combined with a knowing engagement with the pathetic

28. Peter Gizzi, "A History of the Lyric," in *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 4.

29. See the book jacket of *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*.

fallacy for the purpose of pushing the human to the top of abstraction and thus away from sentiment.

Artificial Heart (1998) is the book in which Gizzi came into his own poetically. Here the pronominal address is often generalized; it points to the poet (even in the first-person plural "we"), an unidentified she—as in "The Idea of Order at Key West," a muse or paramour a bit damaged over time but still ready for verse, a version of the subject: "She sang unwrapping her bandages." Articles refer to general impersonal states of being ("the body remembers joy"; "The day static with stuck weeds"³⁰), and a communal, funereally functioning "they" who arrive at the end of poems—Ashberyian in this sense—to bring stories that were not told in this poem but might have been told had we not done our work of telling about something else. Gizzi's "Will Call" ends:

It was an average day
An arrangement of place. A state of report
or a state of grace. For centuries weeds have hidden it.
Now autumn. Silence is what we make
of eyes, trees and growing vine. It pierces.
And these are the stories they will bring in boxes.³¹

The *ut pictura poesis* of "Utopia Parkway," dedicated to New York School-affiliated poet-painter Trevor Winkfield, is written out of Stevens's poems about paintings (especially in *Parts of a World*) and the 1951 MoMA talk, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," which in its turn had influenced O'Hara, Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Schuyler from the start.

There isn't much doubt that Stevens's survival through the New American Poetry is owing largely to Ashbery, whose very earliest verse at Harvard could be said—only now that we can look back on it, for it would have been invisible to caretakers of the Stevens aesthetic then—to be the purest early postmodern legacy of this poet. We know that Ashbery's college friend O'Hara learned his Stevens directly from F. O. Matthiessen in the classroom; O'Hara wrote a thesis for Matthiessen on "Chocorua to Its Neighbor."³² Such a choice, in an era when the Stevens taught, if he was taught at all, was "Sunday Morning"—standard lyric, post-Christian

30. Peter Gizzi, "From a Field Glass," in *Artificial Heart* (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck Press, 1998), 45.

31. Gizzi, "Will Call," in *Artificial Heart*, 53.

32. Alan Filreis, *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 14.

"modernism," but really just modernist sensibility smoothed into a Keatsian line—must have struck O'Hara's other lit teachers as odd, willfully obscure, and "contemporary": late, seriat, post-Romantic, implicated in inexplicable ways with the pragmatic (northern New England) end of the Emersonian and Thoreauvian transcendental ethos. Ashbery's Stevens at Harvard more likely was absorbed through the remnant of the *Advocate*-affiliated salon-style (and implicitly gay) evenings of talk with donnish descendants of Santayana, the crypto-Catholic milieu Stevens himself at Harvard drank in and which helped produce his over-the-top florid, *Comedian as the Letter C* style, in which words like *green* and *blue* seem to be mere on-the-grid symbols of the fertile imagination whose avatar is the modernist ephemerid the young Ashbery doubtless wanted to be when he wrote poems such as "Some Trees." Ashbery fifty years later returned to his and Stevens's alma mater to accept, modestly, the Charles Eliot Norton Chair (the same that Stevens had turned down, having summoned even more embarrassment and irritation at the invitation than Ashbery³³). What Ashbery said in a series of lectures there, published as *Other Traditions* (2000), provides a map back from the New York School to Stevens, even though Stevens is not the subject of any of the lectures. Ashbery was intent on saying nothing that was obvious about his forebears and favorites, but his polite insistence that a nature poet could be modernistic (in describing *everything*—John Clare), that there were surrealists we've forgotten (David Schubert, whom Ashbery learned to admire because Stevens did), that early modernism needed to be rethought (Laura Riding), that Harvard and radicalism on one hand and modernism on the other did sometimes converge (in John Wheelwright), has helped to rewrite the story of the development of Ashbery's lifelong rueful adieu to experience, now so famous as to have become ahistorical. Recent books such as *Your Name Here* (2000) have made Stevens's importance to Ashbery's language more profound than ever. After reading all the poems in such a book, one has the impression that *this* is where Stevensesque modernism was heading all along: an occasional poem that never arrives at its occasion; conventional wisdom, rendered in idiomatic speech, which thus becomes new; the search for a supreme fiction in the way we live our days, as a parable of reality in addition to being meaningful in itself; objects, names, titles; sexy bric-a-brac, unimportant except as words and memories of old words now out of circulation; the erasure of

33. Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923–1955* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 300.

all difference between first-, second- and third-person address as (even) between singular and plural and the floating indexical pronoun (the rhetorical device *polyptoton*). If the pure Stevensean verse of "Some Trees"—a perfect imitation of the Stevens love poem, with a slight homosexual inflection—marks the starting point of Stevens in the New York aesthetic a half century earlier, a minor poem like "A Postcard from Pontevedra" in *Your Name Here* clinches Stevens's relevance to contemporary postmodern poetics.

Two figures, apparently new to each other, meet under some trees, but the location cannot be located except by the measure of how far these two—are they prospective paramours? are they poet and new muse?—mark off the extent of their agreement "with the world"; greater disagreement "with the world" means the poem has moved far afield, but the two have arrived at that not-place together, "arranging by chance to meet." The trees have a language and tell them just to be there, to touch accidentally, as trees do. "Some Trees" veers from nature poetry, as from love poetry, as accident becomes "accent," the stresses of the words on the page, the patient syllables of lyric lines that otherwise don't make complete sense, words "put on" as on a canvas with strokes effecting painted-on leaves. "Some Trees" is pure natural artifice, its accents "seem their own defense," requiring no experimental reality check. The askew hierarchy of love's actions—first we "touch," then we "love," then we "explain"—expresses hope that beyond love, greater even than love, is the performance of speech.³⁴ Written at about the time of Stevens's "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," this is Ashbery's first such soliloquy, a poem about a direction in which the poems might move, measured by estrangement "from the world" and a new kind of affection for the disaffected Other: their accidental quality; their commitment to description without place; their lyric elevation of explanation (poetics) above lyricism (the poem itself). "Some Trees" is a beautiful Stevensean set-piece, almost didactic as such, yet formative for Ashbery in an era in which he had to contend with and maintain distinction from emergent Beat claims of natural writing, spontaneity, digression, and their own very different version of disaffection.

Yet, as I've suggested, I deem the Stevensean Ashbery of recent years more significant. A poem such as "A Postcard from Pontevedra," seeming at first to be one of those easy writes, a paratactic toss-off—

34. John Ashbery, "Some Trees," in *The Mooring of Starting Out* (New York: Ecco Press, 1997), 37.

chatty, demotic, randomly referential ("I was waking up / at the Maison Duck you see")—ends up embodying the problem of how we can live abstractly, aptly dislocated, yet still be of the world, how one can be a terrestrial being bearing a social language, leaving a legacy of poems that form what Stevens movingly called a planet on the table. If later generations, "picking up our bones," will never have known that the body once holding these bones together had made something—a human edifice, the built environment—then these later ones will "speak our speech and never know" that their language is unnatural, that our meaningfulness was *made*. The poem expressing this "Cries out a literate despair" itself; its status as lyric must console the poet-speaker with having made "A dirty house in a gutted world" that is nonetheless "smeared" with the natural, "the gold of the opulent sun." That's Stevens, writing about poetic legacy in the ironically titled "A Postcard from the Volcano,"³⁵ a little verse-message sent to us from an impossible place. It is a poem in which the speaker, despite his instincts to preserve his speech and to make a definite impact, goes along for the ride—permits the wearily observed "literate despair" to become itself the writing. The final opulence, reversing despair, is standard Stevensean modernism: the absence of the imagination had itself to be imagined, a positive emergence at the last moment from the negative out of the realization that emptiness at least must be conceived as such. "A Postcard from Pontevedra," an actual, yet for the poet, wholly invented, seaside place—demands of Ashbery's speaker, living in this postindustrial situation, that he not know where he is situated, that it not matter, that he be deprived of a sense of place. Knowing, rather than not knowing, is generative. The speaker is dislocated, but the questions that develop out of the certainty he does not feel—certainty being an obviously inappropriate stance here—lead us to the most basic earthly song, ordinary sounds produced in the ultimate open-ended place (the ocean), in verse as swim at the very end of the contemporary imagination:

I was waking up with this humming in my ears—
sound of the sea, of a basket of nettles.

It's O.K. to ride, to not go along. I'm not sure
where Pontevedra is. If I was I'd have to ask myself

so many other questions, ones you never
taste in the brightness of your day,

35. Stevens, "A Postcard from the Volcano," in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 128–29.

though they answer me
like the risen sea.³⁶

Where the early Stevensean Ashbery set out a viable poetic program and charmingly asserted his counteraesthetics, the later Stevensean Ashbery is real. His other-worldly line-by-line logic, his antic semisurrealism, is of our world. We know this as we read. Later Ashbery talks of an almost imponderable contemporary social situation which, when Stevens pondered them in his time—talking and writing about war, the demise of newspapers, what we would today call “sprawl,” the bodily numbness produced by modern office work, the absence of suburban street life, the new political geography caused by radio, et cetera—induced a myth of disintegration about the great poet whose “personal life,” and even whose essays and other prose statements, stood separate from the lush poetry. Ashbery reminds us that the poem is the life. We didn’t and perhaps still don’t believe in Stevens’s Pascagoula, his Havana, his Tehuantepec, his Oklahoma, or his Tennessee, but Ashbery’s postcard from Pontevedra speaks of reality, notwithstanding (or rather because of) its devotion to the rhetoric of the unreal.

John Hollander, a poet who as a critic is keenest about Stevens’s music,³⁷ believes absolutely in the necessary veracity of those places. In the Frostian sense, they are discernible poetic destinations, to be (once) beheld and then excitedly recalled. It’s *not* okay to ride and not go along. Hollander’s 2003 book, *Picture Window*, struck reviewers and critics as a renewed case for the mode of Stevens. One critic saw in *Picture Window* that the poems’ speaker “ponders our habits of perception” in the manner of Stevens and Coleridge.³⁸ A reviewer noted that Stevens and Auden were in these poems, as Hollander “combines a reader-friendly alertness with intellectual sophistication.” Stevens via Hollander “develop[s] an instantly recognizable take on ‘the mind’s / Complicating, fragile reflectiveness.’”³⁹ Clearly (keeping to my rude binarism), Hollander is to the meditative post-1975 Stevens as Ashbery is to the languaged. While *Picture Window* can and probably should be read on its own terms, the late style of a poet richly and variously reexpressing an important early influence, I’m tempted to

36. John Ashbery, “A Postcard from Pontevedra,” in *Your Name Here* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 74.

37. John Hollander, “The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound,” in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Robert Buttel and Frank Doggett (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 235–55.

38. Donna Seaman, untitled review, *Booklist* 99, no. 18 (May 15, 2003): 1633–34.

39. Anon., *Publishers Weekly* 250, no. 20 (May 19, 2003): 67.

read it as a lyric contribution to the literary-political battle over one still undecided aspect of modernism's influence on the contemporary—for poetic but also canonical, theoretical, and institutional reasons, a return to Stevens as if to the point where the young Stevensean entered the field (Hollander's first book appeared in 1958) just as the New York School and more generally the New American Poets, with their paratactic, anti- and nonnarrative, postlyric, antic or unrestrained, antiformalist, and serial styles, were being summoned and consolidated, minus Hollander to be sure. *Picture Window* is to my mind the strongest instance, from the meditative/(post)-Romantic side of the Stevens Wars, of the effort to reset the program, to "ponder our habits of perception" again in a 1950s poetic, restoring the moment when the direction after modernism was not yet clear. With a few notable exceptions, the poems of the 2003 volume could have been written in 1958, and not badly, I might add. Deliberate innocence can be a viable mask. In this narrow sense I believe the remarkable poem "Those Fields" to be a deliberately innocent rewrite of "Some Trees," as if to say: *this* is how Stevens ought to play out in our poems.

"Those Fields," in unrhymed three-stressed quatrains (like "Some Trees"), begins in a field. It is a nature poem with simple pathetic fallacies ("kindly lichens"), until we come upon the phrase "among which . . ." and then the emergence of "someone." This "someone then / was picking out a path / and heading for . . ."—*for what?* For a destination somewhere in those fields, an object that the grammar of the lyric withholds from us by qualified language, short enjambed lines, and an accumulation of logically confusing or distancing prepositional phrases. At this point "Some Trees" and "Those Fields" are siblings operating under the sign of Stevens. But in "Those Fields" the lone reflective figure makes meaning not by "picking out a path" through relationships that happen to be right there (in *those* fields) but by remembrances of elsewhere—by waiting, through qualified Stevensean phrasing, until the romantic revelation predictably arrives. And the peaked recollection during what is otherwise a tranquil scene is come upon at the end:

this quickened moment
 of the wild recalled
 from early solitude,
 here at a late place where,
 spotted with rocks of
 fact, regathered fields
 arise in a calm room

in lamplight and its soft
 shadows that give shape
 to what the low sound
 of *now* has come to mean.⁴⁰

This is late Stevens ("A Quiet Normal Life," "An Old Man Asleep," "The Plain Sense of Things," "Large Red Man Reading," "The Poem That Took the Place of the Mountain") rendered in a recalled early derivative style by a poet writing a late poem about "early solitude" made meaningful "at a late place." But whereas in "Some Trees" the two figures (poet and muse? speaker and reader? versions of the subject? two people newly in love?) "[a]re suddenly what the trees try / To tell us we are: / That their merely being there / Means something," the lone walker through the field in Hollander is "heading for what / can no more now be / determined than what tones // of sleep the overcast / sky had contrived to / vary its blank with," and "all certainty" has "now" been "confined to knowledge / of a remembered red" and other colors and recalled images. "Some Trees" is less about a human relationship (it's not really a love poem) than the very idea of relation: two (or more), including whatever quantity the word *some* signifies, come to "mean something" in relation, the context created; merely being in relation (to nature or to selves) generates the meaning, thus accidentally in the case of poems whose words are *themselves* "arrang[ing] by chance to meet" in the poem's language. The accents of the poem are their own defense. This is Ashbery's post-Stevens Defense of Poetry, while Hollander's "Those Fields" is a personal assertion of belatedness. Despite its insistence on "now," it has set its direction toward "what / can no more now be / determined."

If Hollander returns to the poet's house and room in order to reassess the lyric's lineage up through the present speaker, then it's a poem about poetry in that narrow sense. Susan Howe, in *118 Westerly Terrace*, dwells upon the same room with an entirely different result. The room is the source of New World facticity, where "predecessors" contemplated bringing a passionately utopian sense of the quotidian.

Face to the window I had
 to know what ought to be
 accomplished by predecessors
 in the same field of labor

40. John Hollander, "Those Fields," in *Picture Window* (2003; repr., New York: Knopf, 2005), 6–7.

because beauty is what *is*
 What is said and what this
it—it in itself insistent *is*⁴¹

The poet's predecessors, and thus Howe's too (she sees herself in a uniquely unrendered American line that runs from Thoreau through Stevens), intone "the tone of an oldest voice." They inhabit a space where the imagination is housed, a set of facts told in this almost concrete poem about the fact of living. For Howe, Stevens's obsessive dwelling upon the problem of imagination and reality is a literal *dwelling*. What happens thus in the house, in which the largest American red man is reading and writing, is that the passage—the key linguistic element of Howe's historical collage style in *Pierce-Arrow*, *The Non-Conformists's Memorial*, and elsewhere—becomes a space through which one must physically pass, on the way from sleeping to waking, bedroom to desk, imagination to reality, dawn to day. Through the literalization of the passage, Stevens's singular dedication to the life of the imagination can be grounded in New World utopianism, each word reinvested with a spirit we thought we had lost when, from "Sunday Morning" on, Stevens seemed to have declared the end of theology, and his version of post-Christian modernism was born in *Harmonium's* tremendous influence.

It was the passage I always
 used at first fall of dusk so
 the thought of it hangs like
 a bright lamp in the realm
 of spirit where each word is
 consent to being or consent
 to partial being on its own⁴²

Belladonna Press published Howe's poem separately in 2005, and that was the year Knopf published Hollander's "Those Fields," yet how very different are the shadows cast by the domestic Stevensean lamplight. One bathes in the soft calm of a room in which an old personal intensity is recollected. The other portends a "spirit storming in blank walls" ("A Postcard from the Volcano") with the almost magical energy of which an American language has constituted itself.

41. Howe, *118 Westerly Terrace*, 97.

42. Howe, *118 Westerly Terrace*, 98.