

## REDUCING THE MONSTER: SOME ORDINARY EVENINGS WITH WALLACE

Paul Mariani. *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens*. Simon & Schuster, 2016.

*J. D. Garrick*

The greenness of night lies on the page and goes  
Down deeply in the empty glass...  
—Stevens, “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light”

If it wasn't for his personal life, he was a happy man.  
—said of Stevens by a colleague

We enjoy the ithy oonts and long-haired  
Plomets, as the Herr Gott  
Enjoys his comets.  
—Stevens, “Analysis of a Theme”

A damned fine poet but he couldn't fight.  
—Hemingway, of Stevens

This fellow has heresy in his essay.  
—Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

In Conan Doyle's *The Valley of Fear*, Sherlock Holmes remarks to his partner in crimesolving:

You are developing a certain un-expected vein of pawky humour, Watson,  
against which I must learn to guard myself.

It might have been news ninety years ago that Wallace Stevens liked to make jokes. But even today too many of us, one mutters, have taken Stevens too seriously too often, haven't guarded ourselves; it's that Hartford-respectable cover portrait on the old Knopf edition of the *Collected Poems* leading us astray. Some of the stiff-brace titles for recent books on Stevens's work invite parody and would have amused Stevens. But surprisingly, the photo representing Stevens for Paul Mariani's biography *The Whole Harmonium* is more suggestive of Watson's pawky humourist, a fellow who might be more than a little impish—the kind of man who gives his poems droll titles like “Nudity at the Capital,” “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts,” “Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds,” “Lytton Strachey, Also, Enters into Heaven,” and, of

course, “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” which would have made any hippie novelist turn ten shades of pistachio. Then floats a lecture at Mount Holyoke called “Two or Three Ideas.” How else to account for the sweet-singing Stevens’s apparent false notes: “It is the word *pejorative* that hurts” (“Sailing After Lunch”); “A bench was his catalepsy,” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

*Stevens the lunar Arabian, with his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how:* Is life really an old casino in a park, then in a wood, as we’re told in “Academic Discourse at Havana”? In a way, of course, it’s both, especially to poets, and what fine taglines these would make for eighty-dollar boutique T-shirts. But aren’t we living in “an old chaos of the sun,” too, as the speaker says in “Sunday Morning”? *Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)*. Stevens in his best years had a wicked power over words, and sometimes the only answer is that he was choosing them for the way they sounded—“Certain Phenomena of Sound”; “Poem with Rhythms,” he admits it in his titles—and the often startling, often sublime images he could bring out of them, having a bit of fun with our owlish solemnity, pulling our legs and relishing every minute of it. Ithy oonts, make yourselves comfortable; you are the essence of Stevens, whether you come from a parallel universe or not; but surely “a bench was his catalepsy” is over the mark? In Stevens’s defense, we suspect that Milton himself may have missed the bullseye once in a while, and even Ted Williams struck out 27 times the year he hit .406.

A single sentence on the final page of Mariani’s book appealingly sums up Stevens, though we don’t have to agree with all he says:

...if many of the poems remain out of the comfort zone of most readers, especially those poems Stevens composed in the last, bountiful twenty years of his life, they will yield their richness to those willing to enter into his brilliant, funny [emphasis added], haunting, musical, dark, and often consoling world.

For most people who keep poems alive by reading them, Tennyson, Hopkins, and the later Eliot would be more likely sources of consolation than Stevens ever is—unless a truly pawky comic sense is consoling, and why on earth shouldn’t it be? If we’re human, we wish the gravestone of W. C. Fields really did say “On the whole, I’d rather be in Philadelphia”—sadly it doesn’t—and welcome Mariani’s telling us that Stevens escaped household tensions by enjoying comedians like Groucho Marx and Jack Benny on the radio. Mariani, writing paradoxically of “dark” and “consoling,” is wise to remind us to guard ourselves from fixed assumptions.

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and a seasoned biographer of poets: Hopkins, Berryman, Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, William Carlos Williams. He is a genial companion, unfailingly earnest, who invites the reader to respond and reflect along with him. His almost-never-vexing views lean to the conservative side, which makes his revelatory late pages all the more credible. As we traverse the work, we might start nursing the uneasy feeling that Wallace Stevens's character was just a shade more sympathetic than ours; but Mariani's book is not hagiography, just as it is not an exposé though it cites some of Stevens's less-than-endearing faults. Its high spots are fairly modest: In the depths of the Depression, Stevens the insurance executive gets a raise to \$20,000 a year, equivalent to \$350,000 today; Stevens picks a fight with Hemingway on Papa's home turf and is flattened; Stevens finally wins important prizes; then, most crucially from a Catholic point of view, Stevens enters the fold on his deathbed. This last, denied by critical mandarins and his own daughter, is well prepared for by Mariani *passim* and follows naturally from the evidence. But for readers who conclude from Mariani that Stevens led a dull life, there's this challenge: Imagine what it must have been like for Stevens to have looked down at the page and seen he'd just written:

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.

Most poets would have given more than their tonsils to have composed lines like that. A dull life? No, it must have been exciting fairly often, especially in the most fruitful months of his imaginings.

And yet: *L'homme n'est rien, l'oeuvre tout!* When Flaubert wrote these words to George Sand on the last day of 1875, he gave the literary world the best one-line description of Wallace Stevens ever recorded. Two biographies of Stevens bear this out: Joan Richardson's from 1986, now Mariani's. Flaubert, by the way, had written in an earlier letter that "The artist must be in his work as God is in creation, invisible and all-powerful; one must sense him everywhere but never see him." This, too, is part of Mariani's burden, which ought to be showing how Stevens's genius—"Death is the mother of beauty, mystical"—and his nine-to-five competence in surety deals could co-exist in the same person. But at the end of the book the reader still wonders, as the reader must: How could such a person come to be?

Stevens started out in Reading, Pennsylvania, a medium-sized Dutch Country city set among mountains an hour's drive northwest from Philadelphia. (The towns with the naughty names are in Lancaster County, next door.) "I lost a world when I left Reading," Stevens said, and to get the

full import of his words, you'd need to have grown up there. As it happens Reading, pronounced "RED-ing," is also the home town of the present reviewer, born and raised in what Mariani calls the "shabbier south district" as Stevens was a son of "its more affluent north," specifically a town house at 323 North Fifth Street. A childhood's worth of taking the rubber-soled express all through Reading, north, south, east, and west, makes Mariani's town layout strike me as a little too pat: Yes, my own South Eighth Street is on the wrong side of Penn Street and the wrong side of the tracks to boot; but Reading's all-night-noisy, smoky, dirty Outer Station was on Stevens's side at North Seventh Street, the really spectacular homes stood in the woods to the east of both north and south, and the bosky, ever-mysterious Neversink Mountain was on our side. The poet knew something of the muted romance of Neversink, just as he knew the iconic pagoda and tower atop Mount Penn, rising to Neversink's north across the steep-climbing row houses of John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*. These are the opening lines of his "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain":

Unsnack your snood, madanna, for the stars  
Are shining on all brows of Neversink.

Already the green bird of summer has flown  
Away. The night-flies acknowledge these planets,

Predestined to this night, this noise and the place  
Of summer....

The orientation matters since, as we read in Mariani, Stevens married a girl who lived at 231 South Thirteenth Street on this our shabbier side, less than a mile west from the *Rabbit, Run* warren and lying in the shadow of whatever witches, goblins, and ghosts held sway up on Neversink Mountain. The girl, Elsie Kachel—Mariani's choice of two surnames for her—or Elsie Moll, Joan Richardson's pick, was a largely unremarkable townie but with deathtrap looks. A future poet's marrying for beauty has its own logic, just as Hemingway's middle marriages for money and prestige do; but this one didn't work out—see Stevens's gloom-sodden "Red Loves Kit" for reasons—even causing a terminal rift between Stevens and his stern, bearded father Garrett. Mariani writes:

When, that fall, his father asked him pointedly if the only reason he kept coming back to Reading was so that his mother could do his laundry—since otherwise he seemed to spend all of his time with that girl across the tracks—Stevens stormed out of the house. Then, thinking it over, he brought his shy, blond,

blue-eyed girl home to meet his family.... But Garrett Sr., whose depression had deepened in the wake of his disastrous financial losses, had hoped his son's dalliance with Elsie would have ceased by then. When it hadn't, he could no longer hide his real feelings and made the girl feel unwelcome in his home.

Casualties of the class struggle these lovers, sacrificed to plain economics, since Wallace and Elsie came from the same Pennsylvania German heritage and should have spoken a common domestic language. Had Elsie been able to afford a decent education she might have been able to make a separate peace with some of her husband's poems, in an ideal universe if not in ours.

In "Credences of Summer," Stevens writes movingly (and, for Mariani, erotically) of the sunnier days of his liaison with Elsie, picnicking in the rural Berks County village of Oley:

One of the limits of reality  
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,  
Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is  
A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.

The present reviewer remembers fondly the Oley Fair in autumn, "mingling of colors at a festival," with its strong tanned farm girls, heaped squashes, friendly farm animals, pies, and, always the cynosure, a shiny red truck or Farmall tractor. Stevens, had he gone there, would have been equally enchanted with the fair's unspoiled rustic ambience. This was the Oley Valley, for all seasons magical to the inspired poet as to a ten-year-old child of the street:

The personae of summer play the characters  
Of an inhuman author, who meditates  
With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night.

Stevens's blood knew Oley, to be sure. And though his surname isn't a Pennzylfawnisch Deitsch name on any family tree—unlike those of my schoolteachers Klopp, Schmehl, Schrack, Zweizig, and "Kate" Showalter who taught senior English to Updike too—he had similar roots: and we'll find the story in Stevens's "The Bed of Old John Zeller."

*Katzenmoyer, Dreibelbis, Blankenbiller, Tommy Hinnershitz the sprint-car champion from Oley:* These were Berks County people, Elsie's people.

Later, with no small irony, Stevens would treat his daughter Holly's first husband even more coldly than his Dad did Elsie, for much the same reason: class snobbery. Holly Stevens, Wallace and Elsie's only child, remem-

bered that even within the marriage Elsie was “terribly jealous of her father, and—because she could not understand his poetry—felt inferior to him.” In failing to comprehend, say, “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Elsie could have mustered a battalion of readers to agree with her, whatever they wound up writing in their term papers; and to get a feeling for what Elsie felt, we need only to lend ourselves to Harold Bloom’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’: a Commentary.” To me a slog through the Great Grimpen Mire.

Stevens the comedian sometimes came off unpleasantly as the Joker, and here are two examples from Mariani of Stevens’s sometimes boorish behavior at the dinner table. On one occasion, Stevens “asked Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate’s wife, to change seats with the wife of Christian Gauss because Mrs. Gauss knew people he knew.” Mariani comments laconically, “That was Stevens.” Another time, the novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings invited Stevens to dinner, and:

Because Stevens had made it known that he was on a diet, Rawlings . . . served him a special meal of Boston sherried pot roast, salad greens, and fruit. But when he saw that everyone else was enjoying the basked-in-sherry ham she’s prepared, Stevens, who had been drinking again, explained that he’d been dieting not on doctor’s orders but merely to lose weight. . . . Rawlings had gone to much trouble to prepare that beef, and when Stevens went for the ham, she took the beef and tossed it on the hearth, where her pointer devoured it.

“Devoured” is good. Not quite a story out of *Dubliners*, but an anecdote juicy enough; and the doctor *had* in fact ordered Stevens to drop twenty pounds. What host would not have been tempted to murder the man by the nearest means to hand?

Maybe it’s significant that both these incidents involved women. From Mariani’s narrative Stevens, a Republican *tendance* Hoover, could be called sexist, racist, and chauvinistic nationalist too by today’s standards. At first on the side of Mussolini, Stevens favored the Duce’s invasion of Ethiopia, saying that the Italians had “as much right to take Ethiopia from the coons as the coons had to take it from the boa-constrictors.” Here Mariani missed his chance to observe that there aren’t any boa constrictors in Ethiopia and that official business in the country is done in Amharic, a Semitic language. Stevens later backed down from these repellent views. But on the reverse of the record, during his years of living in Manhattan, he showed compassion for the starving cats “slinking along West Twenty-Second Street.” And that should compensate for at least his table sins, in the cat-and-cat enthusiasts’ world if nowhere else. What would St Francis say?

A last bow for Stevens’s more devilish side. As Mariani tells it:

When Richard Bissell, president of the Hartford Insurance Company, died that summer [1941?], Stevens wrote a brief portrait of him for the *Hartford Agent*. Afterward, one of his fellow vice presidents had stopped by Stevens's office to say he'd found the tribute a 'very nice piece.' Stevens, without raising his head, had replied, 'I hope I can do the same for you someday.'"

One might remark, one being in this case an *echt* Pennsy Dutchman with some centuries of rustic ancestors behind him, that Mariani is serving up an example of Dutch Country humor—and of Stevens's. Call it pawky. And if superficially Stevens seems more the Yankee bourgeois than a son of the shoofly pie, schnitz-und-knepp, and souse country, his rough-edged social manner alone might suggest otherwise.

In Donald Hall's recent *Essays After Eighty*, there's a piece called "Thank You Thank You," in which Hall appraises the speaking styles of American poets. "Wallace Stevens," he says, "appeared to loathe his beautiful work, making it flat and half audible." Hall adds slyly that "Maybe he thought the boys in the office would tease him." Mariani says essentially the same thing, citing a poker-faced, humorless, uncommunicative reading Stevens gave at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YMHA in Manhattan. Exasperating man; and the observations by Hall and Mariani are all the more surprising, because Stevens's reading on the old Caedmon vinyl is committed, measured, just: authoritative, close to perfect even. In any case, one concludes that in public readings Stevens was no Dylan Thomas—"a figure antithetical to everything Stevens stood for" in his personal habits. But could even Thomas in person have brought "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" to life?

Stevens, who in 1953 refused to say even a few respectful words at Thomas's funeral and earlier declined to support Ezra Pound in the extremity of Pound's need, wasn't quick to praise or even to value his contemporaries. His fairly close relationship with William Carlos Williams could be prickly and contentious, and only of Marianne Moore was he faithfully supportive. Frost was a kind of friendly sparring mate, to Stevens an old-fashioned plodder whose poems told stories, and Eliot, of course, was in London, far out of Stevens's mundo. Stevens basically stood alone, with no major followers then or later; no other poet in the twentieth century favored him, though his "outlook on life"—in the still faintly echoing sophomore-speak of the '60s—was straightforward enough: He was a realist in quotidian reality and an idealist deep in his mind, in thrall to the Jungian anima, the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, and ever seeking *la donna ideale*, *l'ultima bellezza*. Here is a modern echo of *Faust*, where the eternal feminine draws us upward, as Stevens's poems honor the archetype again and again:

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings  
Of those white elders...

Stevens didn't find his Astarte, his Vincentine, his sensual Susanna, in Elsie. But he wasn't right for Elsie either. Disputably he should have stayed a bachelor:

Stevens, the twentieth-century scholar monk in his monk-like bedroom study, furnished with fresh flowers and gay wallpaper and a contemporary French painting or two to appease his storming spirit.

Once again Mariani's portraiture comes close to what was probably the truth.

But about Stevens's fight with Hemingway, arguably the main attraction of the biography unless the reader's keenly R. C. As Rochefoucauld wrote, "What keeps us from being enslaved by a single vice is that we have a number of others"; and one of Stevens's vices, along with good food, good cigars, and bad jokes, was putting away five martinis in the course of an evening with his pals. Elsie hated this style of life, and maybe Stevens should have paid more attention to her, because on a night in Key West, just before Easter 1936, he made some rude remarks about Hemingway at a party that were overheard by Papa's sister Ursula. She told her brother what Stevens had said, and since this was the third time Stevens had disparaged Hemingway in public, the toasting poet "seemed suicidally itching for a fight" (Mariani). So of course Papa, the lord of Key West, twenty years younger than Stevens and far more fit, showed up on the scene this time, only to be sucker-slugged in the jaw by Stevens. In doing this, Stevens broke his own right fist in two places, Hemingway's jaw being what it was. Then, naturally enough, Hemingway the trained boxer "knocked him down again and again until Stevens could no longer get up." For many years, lovers of literature had known about the fight from a single paragraph in Chapter 39 of Carlos Baker's *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*. But there, no mention is made of Ursula, nor of Stevens's breaking his hand, nor for that matter Stevens's size: six-foot-two, 225 pounds. We must regard Mariani's account as definitive for now.

No matter how smart we think we are, the world usually finds a way for us to make jackasses and jennies of ourselves. But apart from the fight and what led up to it, Stevens and Hemingway seemed to have had plenty of respect for one another. Years later, Stevens called Hemingway "the most significant of living poets, so far as the subject of EXTRAORDINARY AC-



TUALITY [Stevens's caps] was concerned.” To back this up, Mariani sets a passage from *A Farewell to Arms* as twelve lines of free verse; and it works.

Mariani deserves no credit, though, for the barbaric practice of inserting slash marks among Stevens's gorgeous/elegant/witty/obscure lines when he quotes. Pounce-and-slash is plain injurious to poems, and it's surprising Mariani would do this since he's a much-published poet himself. Reading Stevens can be steep enough without breaking up his rhythms with slashes; nor are slashes pleasurable to look at. Neither are Mariani's speculations about what Stevens was thinking, nor his paraphrases, interpretations, and explanations of the poems, especially valuable, since poems written at the level of “Sunday Morning,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” and “The Idea of Order at Key West” have only one meaning: the liberating beauty of their language. “Poetry is the subject of the poem,” as the narrator says in “The Man With the Blue Guitar,” XXII. Stevens's work should be enjoyed as music, not as code or cipher to be cracked. In his remarks on “Thirteen Ways,” for example, Mariani's reference to “death the blackbird” is facile, arresting what could be a spirited debate: The class wit could argue that instead the blackbird represents life, starting with the moving eye and dead snowscape of the very first Way. And doesn't the final Way recall the famous “Anecdote of the Jar”? In any event the bird is alive—and, with a nod to the Trashmen, the bird is a word.

Learned discussions of the “war between the mind and sky” can only distract people who want total immersion in poems, not theories about them; and no matter how long the community of inquirers chews over Stevens's half-dozen recurring ideas, the results will be inconclusive:

And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round  
And the clouds flew round with the clouds.

Had Mariani filled the space—and there's a lot of it—by analyzing Stevens's prosody, it would have been of more use to the reader. He does some technical commentary but not nearly enough; we want to know how this masterful sleight-of-hand jokester was fooling us. Throughout the book, Mariani does better when he offers the reader precise description than he does when he paraphrases or tries to explain. The interplay of consonants and vowels in “twenty snowy mountains” alone, for example, deserves close attention: This is what the ears of poets and listeners are for.

Stevens himself said, in “The Irrational Element in Poetry”: “I am not competent to discuss reality as a philosopher.” And as to Stevens's jury-rigged *weltanschauung*, a word he himself employs in the “New England Verses,” Sartre put it with sufficient clarity: Humankind is condemned to

freedom in a world of chaos; but we still want to believe in an order, believe in at least the possibility of viable action, of answers, as illusory as Kafka's castle though they be; so, through imagination, we struggle upward toward a "supreme fiction." Not that Stevens was a convincing absurd hero, a Pablo Ibbieta from Sartre's "The Wall";—nor, certainly, a doomed one, like Maciek in the film of "Ashes and Diamonds" by the late Andrzej Wajda. Stevens was a country existentialist who never saw Paris. As Nietzsche wrote in a now-celebrated notebook entry, "Art and nothing but Art. We have art so that we do not die of the truth"; and that applies, if with less drama, to the imaginative life of Stevens. Possibly the poet, trying to construct his fiction word by word walking home every day, was really trying to connect with a God who would in any case exist equally in all universes, material and fictive—not least in what Stevens called the momentous world of poetry.

Ordinary physical reality, with the lives of its nagging Elsie and carousing Babbitts measured out by actuarial tables, is not for everyone. Hence poems like Stevens's "Asides on the Oboe":

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,  
Of final belief. So, say that final belief  
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

But must living the fiction demand so much endurance, so much strength, as reading Stevens's later poems often does? A poem like the earlier "Of the Surface of Things" is an unalloyed pleasure to read, for undergraduates as for connoisseurs; the ensuing "A Primitive Like an Orb" is pointlessly strenuous: we push the rock, here called the central poem, up the hill and watch the ugly thing tumble mockingly back down. A good poem gets its work done. Much to be endured and little to be enjoyed, as Sam Johnson concluded, and Stevens is least effective when he seems to be writing for the academies as opposed to lovers of the poetic art and the stray devotee of Lewis Carroll. It isn't surprising that in the declining years of his life and art the reclusive Stevens more and more often worked the Ivy circuit, where he was warmly welcomed and showered with degrees if imperfectly understood. Seeking discoveries, one might be better advised to pore over the wildly maculate (and by Stevens disowned) "Owl's Clover" of 1936, which has a few arresting passages:

...Summer night,  
Night gold, and winter night, night silver, these  
Were the fluid, the cat-eyed atmosphere, in which  
The east wind in the west, order destroyed,

The cycle of the solid having turned.

Lines like those—Were they written by Wallace Stevens or Wallis Simpson?—forged ahead of their time in '36. And Stevens had come a long way from the poems in *Harmonium* (1923), as he'd quantum-leaped from the blackbirds and “rainbows, cuckoos, daffodils, and timid hares” of the Georgians:

The West has purple wings to spread  
Above these tulips in their bed;  
The daffodils have tears to shed  
In angel pity for the dead.

The cuckoo's voice is in the hill;  
The blackbird in the garden still  
Calls to the wallflowers warm and sweet  
To blossom at his yellow feet.

—from “The Garden in Spring” by Fredegond Shove

Maybe we need to go back to Fredegond Shove and the Georgians once in a while to regain perspective and to escape from “A Primitive Like an Orb.”

Whatever the aesthetic, metaphysical, or social value of Stevens's late lines, let quoters' slashes in them be banished to the infernal regions, and let redemption for Mariani proceed unhindered. No one else could make a better job of preparing and delivering the controversial case for Stevens's conversion to the Roman faith, as he lay dying of cancer in St. Francis Hospital in Hartford in the summer of '55. Stevens had said to a friend that “if he ever did join a church, it would be the Catholic Church”; and through the late chapters of the book there are constant allusions to his reviving spirituality: Stevens evokes Pascal with reverence in his talk at Columbia; Stevens finds the Catholicism of his friend Tom McGreevy helping him look on the Church more favorably; Stevens says in a lecture at Chicago that “poetry is supreme over philosophy because we owe the idea of God to poetry and not to philosophy”; Stevens falls in love with Matisse's Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, “full of light”; Stevens writes to his friend Sister Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F., that

Your Easter message made me happy as all your notes do, because they seem to come from something fundamental, something isolated from this ruthless present.

“Something fundamental” was meaningful language to Stevens, point-blank aware of the “ruthless present” of Cold War and Bomb internationally and

his not-so-subtly-forced retirement at the office. So when Mariani tells us, in the course of pages of relevant detail, that Father Arthur Hanley of Hartford's St. Francis Hospital baptized Stevens and gave him communion in extremis, it will strike many readers as following naturally, almost inevitably from the daily thoughts and events of Stevens's life. And the skeptics are free to pick holes in the argument as they best can.

By way of conclusion: Stevens never achieved the enormous range of the most accomplished twentieth century poets: Yeats; Eliot; García Lorca. From "Sailing to Byzantium" through *Four Quartets* and the overpowering "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías," we are plunged into all human experience, all love, all joy, all suffering, all death, all transcendence. When Yeats, the ultimate master, died in 1939, Stevens aspired to replace him;—much to his credit, but it would have been a long reach for a man who was half aesthete (a word Stevens didn't like) and half machine. *Stevens's poems, a little island full of geese and stars...*

Stevens's late works, like the Nielsen sixth symphony and the Mahler seventh, may eventually wind up in the Gordian knot museum, the knot-cutters all exhausted and gone home:

Or these—escent—issant pre-personae: first fly,  
A comic infant among the tragic drapings,  
Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief,  
The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?

Today the late pieces, in which Stevens was "much possessed by death" (Eliot, of Webster), serve chiefly as puzzles for professional academics to solve, rather than as poems to be read with keen enjoyment by bright students. *Phoebus is dead, ephebe*. Some, like "The Role of the Idea in Poetry," are "solid," a current euphemism for mediocre; almost none are "ridiculous," the media's perverse word this year for marvelous, inspired, memorable. There are exceptions, of course: images, lines, passages; see, for example, "The Auroras of Autumn," III, for an especially moving instance.

But Stevens's engine began to sputter because he was low on words ("The effete vocabulary of summer No longer says anything"), those long late poems having consumed too many of them. At least—and this counts for a great deal—Stevens's late work, the poems after "Credences of Summer," honors Eliot's dictum in "East Coker": "Old men ought to be explorers." If people are to survive their institutions, they must always be writing notes toward something: toward cures for every kind of ill; toward peace in the world; toward a sustainable faith.

Stevens fell short of his "Whole Harmonium," his "Grand Poem," his

unified field theory. It was too ambitious. He couldn't find the vital center, the counterpart in words to the seminal four-note motif of the Coltrane Quartet's *A Love Supreme*. As Pound wrote in the very late Canto CXVI:

And I am not a demigod,  
I cannot make it cohere.

That Stevens's finest work belongs in the quintessential Chaucer-to-Eliot anthology is a tribute to a power no one can define, only hold in reverence. Stevens came to glimpse that power late in life, even though, as in "The Sail of Ulysses," he couldn't find the words for it Eliot found. No one living has the lexicon Stevens commanded in his prime with such assurance and grace, such preternatural fluency, as the English language dwindles to curses and growls, twitters, tweets, bleats, and newspeak. Stevens couldn't handle Hemingway in a fist fight, but on paper or out loud, straight through a sheaf of poems half an inch thick, he could go a few rounds with Shakespeare:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Finishing up, I want to thank my old student John Serio for his part of the work on the Stevens concordance, which helped me track down the ever-elusive itchy oonts in their lairs.