

“The Theory of Poetry, / As the Life of Poetry”: Stevens’s Academic Discourse

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ABSTRACT. Wallace Stevens’s lecture “Three Academic Pieces” can be read as a reflection on the place of poetry within the academy as well as the relationship of literary study to so-called harder disciplines such as philosophy and science. Indirectly alluding in the lecture to the dismissiveness towards poetry expressed by A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Stevens proposes poetry’s discourse of “resemblance” as a means of reuniting fact and value in a secular culture. The fruits of this line of thinking can be seen in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” where a shared poetics of the ordinary stands in place of more specialized conceptions of knowledge, poetic or otherwise.

KEYWORDS. Wallace Stevens, logical positivism, sense and reference, pineapples, accuracy, commonplace, university

My beards, attend
To the laughter of evil: the fierce ricanery
With the ferocious chu-chot-chu between, the sobs
For breath to laugh the louder, the deeper gasps
Uplifting the completest rhetoric
Of sneers, the fugues commencing at the toes
And ending at the finger-tips. . . . It is death

That is ten thousand deaths and evil death.

.....

Be tranquil in your wounds. The placating star

Shall be gentler for the death you die

And the helpless philosophers say still helpful things.

Plato, the reddened flower, the erotic bird.

(*CPP* 229)

In this extraordinary passage, from Stevens's "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (1940), a combination of different tones and modes--parody, elegy, high seriousness, and nonsense--coexists within the setting of a fictionalized university. It is an unsettling mixture, as the laughter we expect to follow from the poem's parodic address is horribly implicated in the sobs, gasps, and sneers of "evil death." The laughter of evil and its "fierce ricanery" in turn recall the "ric-a-nic / [and] envious cachinnation" of Stevens's earlier "Mozart, 1935" (*CPP* 107). In both poems, the fictive persons addressed can be said to occupy ivory towers. The injunction in the latter, "be seated at the piano," is a call for the poet to inhabit "the Mozartian music room, apparently immured from cries, [which] is at the same time the place from which cries might be re-played" (Leighton 175). Meanwhile, in "Extracts," if there is a time of crisis, in wartime, it is seemingly one of which the academicians were previously unaware, living in a world of "so many written words" (*CPP* 228). "The ivory tower," Stevens writes, "was offensive if the man who lived in it wrote, there, of himself for himself. It was not offensive if he used it . . . to get at his subject, even if his subject happened to be the community and other people, and nothing else" (*CPP* 718). Given that the academy of "Extracts" is an academy of fine ideas--not, as Gül Bilge Han points out, fine arts (159)--its object would appear to be theodicy, or at least the

contemplation of what a theodicy could be like in a world where death is death, and “the helpless philosophers” offer what sounds, via the inert-sounding “still,” like a distinctly outmoded kind of consolation: “Plato’s dear, gorgeous nonsense” still issuing from the original academy (*CPP* 643). In both poems, the tension inherent in the idea of the ivory tower--between a contemplative ideal pursued for its own sake and an awareness of the suffering of the wider world outside--is acute, and it is hardly resolved by “The placating star” (or, in “Mozart,” “a starry placating”) invoked by the poet’s distant words (*CPP* 108).

Such ivory towers in Stevens’s poetry figure a theoretical attitude with which the poetry contemplates its role in a secular world, where, as Stevens pithily summarizes, “All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, . . . which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence” (*CPP* 652). This, as he understood, was not, to use Charles Taylor’s term for it, a narrative of “**subtraction**”; rather, the problem for poetry was its marginalization within the “**newly constructed self-understandings**” of the secular imagination (Taylor 22).¹ Such “Addresses,” then, assuming the form of what Milton J. Bates terms “**the mock-pedantic lecture or treatise**” (16), serve as a way of representing these questions, while also addressing them to the reader, as typified by the apostrophe to the young pupil-poet “ephebe” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Through this form of “**triangulated address**,” to use Jonathan Culler’s term (186), we too are placed as subjects within such settings’ pedagogical questioning, as well as their questioning of pedagogy. In this way, the poems’ many fictive academics--Professor Eucalyptus, Canon Aspirin, multiple scholars--serve as both foils and analogues to the poet’s own voice, a dynamic strikingly replicated in Stevens’s correspondence throughout his career with a number of young scholars, including José Rodríguez Feo, Peter Lee, Robert Pack, and Bernard Heringman.

Stevens’s imitative usage of the trappings of academia, however, as well as his imaginative investment in scholarly lives, suggest a related preoccupation with the idea of the

university and the place of poetry in relation to it. Stevens's attitude to this so-called ivory tower appears ambivalent: on the one hand, he distinguished his own poetic practice from the limited scope of the "purely academic" (*L* 476); and yet, on the other, he conceived of poetry as "one of the great subjects of study," to be studied, presumably, within the walls of a venerable institution resistant to "the pressure of the contemporaneous" (*CPP* 639, 788). Stevens's keen interest in the university, I would like to suggest in this article, figures as part of his response both to poetry's comparative loss of prestige in modern society and to its increasing specialization within such institutions, and it serves as one expression of his related emphasis, as Gül Bilge Han writes, on "the independence of poetic thinking from the pressures and impositions of philosophical discourse" (169). Unlike the detached contemplation of the academicians in "Extracts," the study of poetry, for Stevens, would be "a vital activity," involving the search for a mode of consolation appropriate to the chaotic conditions of a modern, secularized age (*L* 815).

Stevens's thinking on this question developed out of his friendship with Henry Church, a wealthy patron of the arts and former expatriate, who had been forced to remain in the United States following the invasion of France in 1940 (Richardson 164-5). Stranded in America, he sought, with Stevens's advice and encouragement, to establish "a Chair of Poetry" at Harvard for the "study [of] the theory of poetry in relation to what poetry has been and in relation to what it ought to be" (*CPP* 805). Stevens's "Memorandum" proposed that the study of poetry, "in a high academic sense," would not consist of a "literary course," nor teach the writing of poetry (*CPP* 807, 805); instead, it was projected with the idea of poetry's importance as a compensatory form of belief:

While aesthetic ideas are commonplaces in this field, [poetry's] import is not the import of the superficial. The major poetic idea in the world is and

always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary. (*CPP* 806)

Such study would provide for society in poetry what was previously sought in religion; consequently, as Adalaide Kirby Morris writes, “the substitute is the search itself: poetry and the theory of poetry” (10), with the poet as “the appreciatory creator of values and beliefs” (*CPP* 814). The Chair of Poetry, Stevens thought, would serve as a check on modern humanism’s inclination towards the merely “superficial” and, in the process, redress what he saw as the marginal status of poetry as then taught by the academy’s “educators” (*L* 358). Though still within the ivory tower, the Chair would serve as “a brilliant center” around which poetry could recover its former importance (*CPP* 806).

Both before and during this correspondence, Stevens was invited to lecture at various universities and academic conferences, giving his first public lecture, “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” at Harvard in 1936, an avocation that, although begun late, would be maintained right up until the end of his life. With Church’s sudden death in 1947, and his hopes for an endowed chair consequently extinguished, these occasional lectures gave Stevens the opportunity to continue his thinking on poetry’s role within society, as well as its relationship to more obviously technical disciplines such as philosophy. When he came to collect some of the lectures in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, he described them as “the only realization possible . . . of those excited ambitions” that would have been realized in the Chair (*CPP* 639).

The lectures themselves, while suggestive of Stevens’s idiosyncratic method and manner, present several problems to the reader. Often oblique in both style and structure, and

rarely leaving a statement unqualified, they seldom address their apparent subject directly, preferring instead to observe it, as Peter Brazeau writes, “as if through a prism, catching varying facets of its theme” (164). For this reason, Stevens’s public prose has received remarkably little critical engagement beyond being culled for isolated statements serving as glosses for the poetry. B. J. Leggett even apologizes for his extensive use of the prose, lest he be seen as “claiming a high place for the essays and lectures in the theoretical literature of modernism.” Stevens’s essays and lectures are, in Leggett’s view, deficient for their “lack [of] any sense of finality as theory,” which can be attributed to the milieu in which they were given as “occasional pieces, most of them written to be spoken to small audiences of academics, with whom Stevens was always ill at ease and consequently at his most evasive” (11).

What such perspectives overlook, through an over-emphasis either on first-hand accounts of Stevens’s readings or Stevens’s own pronouncements on the discomfort he felt in the “academic atmosphere[s]” in which he mostly read (*L* 401), are the aesthetic and performative qualities of the lectures. They subvert our expectations of what a lecture in the university should do, and the language in which we expect it to be framed; in this way, they act out the possibility of poetry theorizing instead of deliberately expounding a theory of poetry themselves. It is only fairly recently that the element of design in Stevens’s public prose, its status as a “self-referential performance,” has been acknowledged (Ragg 124). Moreover, the lectures’ relationship to their primary context, the modern American university, remains to be explored in depth.

The neglected lecture “Three Academic Pieces,” given at Harvard in 1947, offers a clue for how we should begin to think about Stevens’s lectures and, as I will argue, acts out his conception of the poet’s role within the secularized space of the university; I will then consider how some of the motifs originating in the lecture are subsequently developed in “An

Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949). Comprising a prose essay followed by two distinct poems uncollected elsewhere, the presentation juxtaposes a form customary for academic lectures with what Culler identifies as "the performative character of lyric," and plays between the respective dictions of these two modes of address (125). The two lecture-poems recall Stevens's earlier academic fictions and announce themselves as such--within the actual space of the academy. Thus, the "triangulated address" of Stevens's prior practice is conferred directly upon the audience of the lecture, with poetry finding a place for itself in the university through the dimension of its performance. Moreover, in its combination of the respective voices of academic lecturer and poet, the presentation articulates the potential tensions inherent in the poet's taking up of the role of the pedagogue. In this way, Stevens's public prose presents the poet at the lectern as Edward Said later wished his model of the public intellectual to appear, as an "amateur" aloof from the "professionalized activity" of the audience, using this distance to provoke deeper reflection upon the society in which they both participate (61).

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In 1936, the year when Stevens would give his first lecture at the university, Harvard's seal was modified for its tricentenary. The authorities "chopped the words *Christo et Ecclesiae* and left the term *Veritas* to stand alone in the three open books," as it stands to this day (Reuben 15). This altered symbology marked the culmination of the secular reform of the American academy, begun in the mid-nineteenth century, a "metamorphosis from old-time religious college to modern university" that was no more pronounced than at Harvard, Stevens's alma mater (Marsden 151). When he returned to deliver "The Irrational Element in Poetry," he would have undoubtedly noticed the difference: the liberal college he had

attended in the years 1897-1900, whose elective system had allowed him “to enjoy a broad-based humanistic education” (Andrews 58), had been transformed in the intervening period into the “compartmentalized” space of the modern university, with its new-found emphasis on specialist research (Marsden 292). Likewise, the typical academic in the American university had changed significantly from that of Stevens’s generation--when the Harvard faculty had included such wide-ranging educators as William James, Charles Eliot Norton, and George Santayana--becoming in the intervening period a more specialized figure, as the appearance of what James in 1903 termed “the Ph.D. octopus” heralded the demise of “the creative amateur thinker” (Marsden 158).

The year of Stevens’s first lecture also saw the publication of A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*, which “canonized” the Vienna Circle’s proposed exemption of questions of belief and value from philosophy as part of an emergent movement known as logical positivism (Marsden 294). Adopting “the criterion of verifiability,” by which statements could be judged “factually significant” only if the conditions under which they were said were empirically or logically demonstrable, Ayer relegated the metaphysician to the level of a “misplaced poet” (16, 27), as later quoted by Stevens in “Imagination as Value” (*CPP* 727). As the ideals of free inquiry and *Wissenschaft* that had originally spurred reform developed in time into an “objectivist scientific ideology,” the premise that such research into empirical fact could be wholly detached from questions of value, which expressed only an emotional content, was already largely accepted (Marsden 292). As a result, logical positivism was readily “domesticat[ed] in post-war American universities” (LeMahieu 19) in the belief “that the distinction between fact and value would lead to more reliable knowledge as measured by general agreement” (Reuben 269). This prevailing discourse, “the one tradition that is most antithetical to Stevens’ own interests and poetic manner of thinking” (Eeckhout, “Stevens and

Philosophy” 106), would have been resistant to the poet’s provocative assertion “that poetic value is an intrinsic value” (*CPP* 734).

In “Three Academic Pieces,” then, we may see Stevens himself performing the role of the “misplaced poet,” who, under the sign of its fixation on isolated “*Veritas*,” brings exiled metaphysics and questions of value back inside the secular academy. The ironic disposition of the lecture’s title hints at an inquiry of limited scope, as William Doreski limits it by calling it “a study of metaphor” (153). In fact, what the lecture accomplishes, through Stevens’s careful attention to the ways in which language handles reality, is a challenge to logical positivism’s emphasis on the constative statement. In the lecture’s opening lines, we can see how Stevens turns this academic discourse in poetry’s favor:

<ext>THE ACCURACY of accurate letters is an accuracy with respect to the structure of reality.

Thus, if we desire to formulate an accurate theory of poetry, we find it necessary to examine the structure of reality, because reality is the central reference for poetry. (*CPP* 686)</ext>

Here, Stevens’s mannered adoption of what Frank Kermode calls the “the workaday diction of the lecturer” exaggerates the movement of the propositional statement to a hyperbolic extreme, as it also does in its obsessive, Steinian repetition of the word *accurate* and its cognates (83). This, alongside the ambiguous pun on “letters” unsettles the aura of confident intelligibility we might otherwise draw from the lecturer’s technical vocabulary (“formulate,” “necessary,” “examine,” “reference”), destabilizing its referential grip on the would-be empirical “structure of reality.” This parody of “a logical lunatic” in the lecture’s opening, however, contains a serious point (*CPP* 285). The tautology of “accuracy” questions such

propositions' grasp on empirical reality and, in turn, renders the monopoly of such empiricism on "reality" questionable. Moreover, through its repeated insistence on reality, the lecture reveals the strategy underlying its challenge to logical positivism, as Stevens shows that "writers cannot . . . yield the facts to the logical positivists in the name of values understood simply as feeling" (LeMahieu 57). He does not simply pit verification against valorization but instead presents a view of poetry in which each activity would invoke the other.

Stevens does this through the suggestive use of a concept he names resemblance. In nature, Stevens argues, "resemblance constitutes a relation between [things] since, in some sense, all things resemble each other" (*CPP* 686). This likeness-in-difference is also present in metaphor's "creation of resemblance by the imagination" (*CPP* 686-7), which thus serves to mediate between what the eye perceives ("the text of life") and what the mind imagines ("one's meditations on the text") (*CPP* 689). To truly get at reality, then, it is not enough to establish a solid identity between the propositional statement and an empirical reality logically or experientially perceived; instead, one catches a glimpse of the whole through parts inflected and interrelated by their resemblance to each other (*CPP* 687). While Stevens's account may be insufficiently rigorous for the professional philosopher, it is nonetheless fitting that "resemblance" behaves as such an ambiguous concept, given its interstitial function of creating "relations." It is also an example of what Gül Bilge Han identifies as "the various strains [Stevens] evokes *between* philosophical and poetic realms," as the poet-lecturer contrasts his language with the statements of the logical empiricist, who would exclude the effects of connotation from a statement's factual meaning (142). The immanence of metaphor in everyday life, Stevens declares, "binds together" (*CPP* 686), reconciling us to the world in a way that religion (from *religare*, to bind) was formerly supposed to. From this, a definition follows: "Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for

resemblance” (*CPP* 690). In this way, Stevens concludes that the poet’s function is to reconcile the world of the human and its values to its grounding in everyday fact; by doing so, as he wrote in an earlier lecture, the poet “help[s] people to live their lives” (*CPP* 661).

Thus, Stevens resists the prevailing discourse of the mid-century American academy, in prose that insists instead on the oblique means by which we approach the real, postulating “that the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one” (*CPP* 692). The switch from prose to lyric poetry in the latter parts of the lecture further emphasizes this continuity. Unlike the statement of prose, however, the poem is a performance, an act, or, as in “Ordinary Evening,” “the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it” (*CPP* 404). It is fitting, then, that the first poem, “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” should announce itself and its lecture-situation to be part of the artifice that constitutes the “res” of the real:

O juvenes, O filii, he contemplates
A wholly artificial nature, in which
The profusion of metaphor has been increased.

(*CPP* 693)

This opening alludes to Stevens’s famous apostrophe at the beginning of “Notes” and amplifies what Helen Vendler calls its “fiction of instruction” (189). Here, it is Stevens’s audience who are the subject of poetic address. Consequently, the performative dimension of lyric poetry is emphasized as it occurs within the public space of the university. This serves to illustrate a point Stevens makes in the prose, “that the structure of reality because of the range of resemblances that it contains is measurably an adult make-believe” (*CPP* 689), asserting the role of imagination not only in the individual act of perception but also in the

interpersonal, shared reality of everyday life. Thus, following Culler, we should not see the illocutionary act of the poem as the end, but the means of what Stevens is doing here. The poetic address is used with the intention of highlighting the fictive nature of the “social imaginary” itself: to extend the “he,” a fictive observer contemplating “A wholly artificial nature,” to include the whole of the poem’s audience (131).

This juxtaposition of the prose piece with the poem contrasts the lecturer’s address with that of the poet, highlighting the tension at work in Stevens’s combination of these two forms of address: how might the poet’s performative utterance be accepted “by general agreement,” as Reuben put it? Attempting to illustrate and confirm the prose’s assertions of poetry’s centrality in a time of disbelief, this lecture-lyric presents a collective fiction of an alternative form of epistemological research, which is pursued collaboratively: as Stevens mock-portentously declares, “There had been an age / When a pineapple on the table was enough” (*CPP* 695). The pineapple, a seemingly absurd object for academicians to contemplate, was, as Kimo Reder points out, the fruit that “John Locke used . . . to illustrate empirical contact as a necessary precursor to knowing”; meanwhile, as a “double misnomer,” the “pine-apple” serves in Stevens’s account to illustrate that the object “can be assembled only via analogies and sensory metaphor” (259). Moreover, in its tessellated shape, “Like the same orange repeating on one tree” (*CPP* 695), it emphasizes the multi-parted design of the lecture itself. This central poem is a microcosm of the whole, itself organized in three parts, and written in Stevens’s preferred form of unrhymed tercets, alluding thereby both to the plain fact of three-dimensional Euclidean geometry and the divine order of three that the poet must seek to adapt, substitute, or supersede.

As it develops, the poem follows the prose in seeking to align fact and value through the resources of poetry, leading to the several transformations of the (wholly fictive) object that occur in the poem. Performed as an imaginative demonstration for its audience,

Stevens's ekphrasis produces a pineapple that resembles everything except itself: "If" the poem's contemplative observer

sees an object on a table, much like
A jar of the shoots of an infant country, green

And bright, or like a venerable urn,
Which, from the ash within it, fortifies
A green that is the ash of what green is,

He sees it in this tangent of himself.
And in this tangent it becomes a thing
Of weight, on which the weightless rests: from which

The ephemeras of the tangent swarm, the chance
Concourse of planetary originals,
Yet, as it seems, of human residence.

(*CPP* 694)

As we can see, the poem also retains the prose's hybridized diction as well as its adoption of the theoretical stance of the academic. The bravura usage of "tangent" in the passage blends the language of geometry and aesthetics together as both the point of contiguity and the piquant "tang" of the fruit itself. This combination ably demonstrates how "our notion of aesthetic experience can be extended beyond its circumscribed cultural sphere" (Altieri 157). The pineapple stands metonymically for our sense of the world: not analyzed or anatomized

but viewed in its part-relations, as something constantly in motion, in metamorphosis--note the unsettled, doubled “is”--as the green seen is already the ash of another consummation of reality and the imagination, housed in the Keatsian “venerable urn” or the Stevensian anecdotal jar of the pineapple’s form.

From contiguity, Stevens proceeds etymologically to the contingent: “the chance / Concourse of planetary originals,” of, as he announces earlier in the poem, “the sun, / The moon and the imagination” (*CPP* 693). Though such moments of concurrence between the rational, irrational, and the imaginative are by necessity “ephemeras,” they nonetheless present a vision of poetry’s role as offering a secularized experience of what Taylor names “moments of fullness, . . . experiences of exile overcome” (10). The poem therefore shows, as Angela Leighton writes, that “there is a home for the human in this inhuman sufficiency of things in their atomic drift” (179). It is in this way that “Three Academic Pieces” collectively argues for the implicitly therapeutic function latent in poetry’s contemplation of reality.

These “moments of fullness,” as they occur within the poem, are shown to be the product of metaphor. As “a semantic event that takes place at the point where several semantic fields intersect” (Ricoeur 114), metaphor’s capacity to unite denotative and connotative language serves to exemplify the prose piece’s earlier emphasis on reality, and its conjecture that “the whole field of connotation is based on resemblance” (*CPP* 689). Such a synthesis occurs in the poem’s third section, as its exposition of the imagination’s effect on the perceived object erupts, proliferating elaborate illustrations:

How thick this gobbet is with overlays,
The double fruit of boisterous epicures,
Like the same orange repeating on one tree

A single self. Divest reality
 Of its propriety. Admit the shaft
 Of that third planet to the table and then:

1. The hut stands by itself beneath the palms.
2. Out of their bottle the green genii come.
3. A vine has climbed the other side of the wall.

(*CPP* 695)

Totalling twelve points in all, this “joyous catalogue of images” represents a serial making-up of the pineapple, reassembled through a perspectival sequence of metaphorical resemblances (Maeder 64). The emphasis is decidedly on pleasure, on plenitude achieved through an epicurean relish for metaphor and its promiscuous transferals of sense, which, as “propriety” suggests, generously exceeds the identity of both the singular object and the individual subject, positing instead a community of shared value beyond the “single self.” And yet, however prodigal or profligate “These casual exfoliations” may seem, this is not the imagination as bacchanalia: as the passage declares, the admission of the imagination does not preclude but rather reinforces descriptive accuracy (*CPP* 696). Each of these intensely visual metaphors exemplifies the way in which denotative reference and connotative description work together within poetry, indirectly denoting (through deixis) and directly connoting (through riddling imagery) the imaginary pineapple. Through this interplay, Stevens presents poetry’s capacity to move between these two modes of signification, which, as Lucy Alford writes, allows for “the bidirectional reconnection of the imaginative and perceptive capacities,” forming an “interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals” (41, quoting *CPP* 659). By the poem’s conclusion, the pineapple is

An object the sum of its complications, seen

And unseen. This is everybody's world.

Here the total artifice reveals itself

As the total reality.

(CPP 696)

The nested references of the poem's deixes ("This," "Here"), as illocutionary acts situated both within the poem and within its performance inside the academy, serve Stevens's perlocutionary objective: moving our contemplation's focus from the object in isolation to its metaphorical "complications" as a part of reality. This study of resemblance in turn leads to the decentralization of the pedagogic voice, as the poem moves from the removed "he" at the lectern, through to the deictic-possible "Someone" of the poem's title, before arriving eventually at "everybody's world." Through this "*Bildung*," a potentially hieratic relationship between the poet-lecturer and his audience is avoided (Blevins 114). Instead, a space is opened for the intersubjective via the process of the poem, where the "total artifice" of appearances can be naturalized as the "total reality." This provisional, poetic study is distinguished from the "systemizing" (L 430) of both idealists and empiricists: the "sum" is neither summit nor summa. Instead, it is seen

In the planes that tilt hard revelations on

The eye, a geometric glitter, tiltings

As of sections collecting towards the greenest cone.

(CPP 697)

The geometric order discovered by the poet is one that is formed in secular time, from “hard revelations” that are immanent rather than imminent in the world, in a process which resists the “disenchantment” of secular time by moving towards, without ever reaching, the superlative ideal (Taylor 328). It illustrates Stevens’s proposal in the prose piece that “it is not too extravagant to think of resemblances . . . as a source of the ideal” that cannot be dismissed even though “we think that we have long since outlived the ideal” (CPP 693). This belated “since” is taken up anaphorically at the beginning of the final section of the lecture, “Of Ideal Time and Choice,” an exemplary instance of what Siobhan Phillips identifies as Stevens’s “diurnal poetry,” proposing that “the imagined and the actual might alternate in a pattern as ordered and ordinary as night and day” (73-4). Calendrical pattern in this way institutes an affirmative repetition, projecting in turn a vision of ideal cosmic order--a universe in the university--formed from the “thirty mornings” of everyday perception spelt out by the thirty lines of the poem’s first, interrogative sentence. This sentence, as an ideal, gradually approximates a “silent motioner”: a new *primum mobile* that will suffice to replace the old (CPP 697).

As in Piece 2’s titular “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” which juxtaposed the florid world-building of the poet-pedagogue with the “pale arrondissements” of the “forfeit scholar” (CPP 695), the poem derives another foil or counterimage, “old men” who fail to derive such affirmative moments from everyday reality (CPP 697). They fail, the poem suggests,

because they lack the will to tell

A matin gold from gold of Hesperus

The dot, the pale pole of resemblances

Experienced yet not well seen[.]

(*CPP* 698)

Stevens here seems to play upon the famous example Gottlob Frege supplied to distinguish between sense and reference: namely, the identical reference (the planet Venus) and differing senses attached to the epithets Morning Star and Evening Star, Phosphorus and Hesperus (219). Wedded to a reality methodically stated but whose differentials of sense have yet to be imaginatively perceived, these figures would miss the hermeneutic insight that “the sun has not ceased to set for us, even though the Copernican explanation of the universe has become part of our knowledge” (Gadamer 465). Through a concentrated pun on “tell,” uniting the three actions denoted by the verb--to distinguish, to count, to narrate--the poem joins accurate observation of experience with the imagination’s meditation upon it to assert the cognitive as well as emotional value of poetry with respect to everyday life, as opposed to an exclusively rationalist perspective. Moreover, as the choice of “matin” for an epithet shows, the poem makes a claim for poetry’s capacity to recast formerly religious experiences into secular terms.

In this way, the poem’s conclusion steps outside of the prior sentence’s earlier future-interrogative and into a pure future, pivoting from its address to an ideal time, and its annunciation (“And who shall speak it”), to another figure at the lectern, who will present the “dissertation” (*CPP* 697) by which “A world agrees”:

The orator will say that we ourselves

Stand at the center of ideal time,

The inhuman making choice of a human self.

(CPP 698)

The lecture thus ends with another displacement of the lecturer, establishing instead the plurality of “we ourselves,” matched by a plurality of resemblances. The poem performed therefore establishes, at least provisionally, what Douglas Oliver theorizes as the “special intersubjectivity” between speaker and audience, which, via the verse’s “temporal consonance,” lessens divisions between the two, as also between immanent time and the human experience of it, in an “inhuman making” that must be continually remade (172). The poet, resembling the lecturer, offers a theory of the theory of poetry in a poem which resists both epiphany and the teleology of the positivist, one who instead offers a vision of interpersonal continuity that may adapt itself to the university’s secular rhythms of change.

* * *

Despite its relative plainness when compared to the gaudy “Three Academic Pieces,” “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” nonetheless seems to build on the lecture’s insights. First read by Stevens on November 4, 1949, to the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, in an abridged form consisting of eleven cantos two years after the Harvard paper, this address-poem shares that lecture’s fascination with “The swarming activities of the formulae / Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at, // Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet . . .” (CPP 417), while simultaneously elaborating its poetics of the everyday.

Describing his intentions in the poem to Bernard Heringman, Stevens emphasized its focus on this domain: “my interest is to try and get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get” (L 636). Appearing as “an epistemological experiment and an empirical report” (Phillips 83), the poem also retains much of the lecture’s

“academic” style in reflecting upon the complicated interrelationship between poetry and ordinary reality:

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
 Appearances of what appearances,
 Words, lines, not meanings, not communications,

 Dark things without a double, after all,
 Unless a second giant kills the first--
 A recent imagining of reality,

 Much like a new resemblance of the sun,
 Down-pouring, up-springing and inevitable,
 A larger poem for a larger audience[.]

(*CPP* 397)

This first canto establishes the mode of the poem in miniature, forecasting its main stylistic devices of fragmentary apposition and recycled utterance. Yet the poem’s pronounced (and often commented-upon) reflexivity is met by an attentiveness to its New England environment; it might, without too much exaggeration, be described as a topographical or “**loco-descriptive**” poem (Cook 267). This, alongside the canto’s reference to its real (and later metaphorical) audience, foregrounds the role within the poem of what Stevens in his letter to Heringman dubbed the “commonplace.” Seeking to depict the mutuality of artifice and everyday life, the poem again takes up the concept of resemblance to affirm the place of poetry in our daily configuring of reality, a necessary “double” of the activities of the

everyday, while nonetheless emphasizing the “recent,” provisional nature of these imaginings.

Yet, whereas “Three Academic Pieces” had been content to suspend its conflation of the structure of poetry with reality as a “hypothesis” (*CPP* 692), “Ordinary Evening” presses upon this assertion; the poem thus shows a salutary awareness of the risks involved in identifying poetry absolutely with reality. In that same letter to Heringman, Stevens had claimed that the “object” for the poem’s submersion in the commonplace was “of course to purge oneself of anything false” (*L* 636). In canto IX--the third in the eleven-canto version read to the Academy--the poem enacts such a radical reduction:

We keep coming back and coming back
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality.

(CPP 402)

Here the appositional thrust of the poem turns recursive, inducing restatements in place of embellishing variations, without “trope or deviation,” a negative counterpart to Stevens’s metaphorical extensions in “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together.” The canto’s preoccupation with “The poem of pure reality,” an idea of unmediated, direct vision, produces--and is unsettled by--its constant revision of its perspective, its shifting approximations towards the certain, “without reflection.” The poem thus presents its own anxieties as a mode of contemplation as it is arrested and tautologically “transfix[ed]” by its inability to inhabit “clear . . . sight.” Its pointing itself plots out this drama, as its first three reiterative sentences, culminating in the minimalist sentence “We seek / Nothing beyond reality,” play upon the poem’s inability to reach the superlative “exactest point,” which then occasions the volta that permits the reintroduction of “the spirit’s alchemicana” and an ultimately enlarged definition of reality (CPP 402).

In thus recovering its dialectical momentum, its attachment not only to “the visible, // The solid, but [also] the movable, the moment,” the poem attempts to theorize a different vocation for poetry as a valid form of reflective activity (CPP 402). In canto XXVIII--in both versions a kind of intermediate summary before the poem’s final three sections--both poet and poem nonetheless seem to hesitate before this identification of poetry and theory:

If it should be true that reality exists
 In the mind: the tin-plate, the loaf of bread on it,
 The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her

 Misericordia, it follows that

Real and unreal are two in one[.]

.....

This endlessly elaborating poem

Displays the theory of poetry,

As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize

Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory

Of poetry is the theory of life[.]

(*CPP* 414-5)

At first, the lecturer's premise segues seamlessly into a bare inventory of the everyday, which again displays the role of resemblance: the meagre "tin plate" seemingly builds up the whole scene, as each item implies and calls up the next by metonymy. (As Stevens writes in his *Adagia*, "Things are because of interrelations or interactions" [*CPP* 903].) That such a catalogue concludes in "Misericordia" indicates a certain clear-eyed honesty in the poem's approach to the ordinary, as opposed to an idealization of it; moreover, Stevens's transposition of the word from its original context to a secular milieu is suggestive of the poem's overall progression towards a view of the everyday as latently carrying the same potential for image-making as the more grandiose narratives of paganism and Christianity. Proposing, then, that "Real and unreal are two in one," the poem nonetheless displays hesitation in its conclusions regarding "the theory of poetry," as first indicated by means of a prevaricatory comma, and then subsequently in the poem's summoning up of a "harassing master" who "would" insist that "the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life." This hieratic

figure seems to promise, on the one hand, a greater rigor than Stevens's improvisational, "endless" poem has so far been able to muster and, on the other, an aesthetics that could progress beyond mere reflection upon life to expound a mode of living itself.

As we saw earlier, the poem here seems to mistrust its own attraction to a "pure poetry" that would collapse the distinction between reality and poetry just as when, in "Three Academic Pieces," it mistrusted the claims of "pure" fact or "pure" science. Such a theory would lose its etymological connection with ordinary reality as a kind of looking-on (*theoria*) by rendering it indistinguishable from its own poetic reflections upon it, and would consequently risk becoming, to use Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phrase, a form of "high-altitude thinking," unreceptive to the environment in which it is inevitably situated (73).

"Resemblance" would then supply a name for the ways in which the poem as a whole resists such an equation, through the syntactical, modal, and metaphorical means by which Stevens manages to infer a relationship between poetry and the everyday, while, crucially, retaining a creative distance between the two terms.² The poem thus constitutes a companion to Stevens's defense of poetry in "Three Academic Pieces" as a mode of poetic theory that does not derive "proofs" about reality but, rather, seeks to creatively redescribe it and, in doing so, reconcile our existing modes of knowledge to our imaginative evaluation of them.

Given the way the poem aligns its theoretical discourse on poetry with its depiction of the everyday, we may question Liesl Olson's opposition of "the routine of ordinary life" and "the intellectual sphere of the academy" in her discussion of Stevens's presentation of the former (129). Instead, we should see Stevens's academic interventions in "Ordinary Evening" and "Three Academic Pieces" as attempts to make poetry, the academy, and the everyday less insular with respect to each other by proposing a shared poetics of the commonplace in contrast with the "more severe" principles of an exclusive rationalism or a pure poetry. Indeed, as it acknowledges in its title, "Three Academic Pieces" draws much of its salience

from its situation within the modern American university as it challenges its prevailing discourse of “fact.” This process, as it occurs within the academy, is suggestive as a conception of the poet’s role in society as a whole, as one who challenges the dominant culture. We might even go as far as to say that these academic interventions project a model of institutional poetics as a valid area of study which, nonetheless, cannot be reduced to a form of specialized knowledge. Yet, we must also say that this placement of the poet within the university presents the limitations of this vision insofar as it expresses Stevens’s belief that the poet must continue “to address himself to an élite” (*CPP* 661). Furthermore, given his considerably ambivalent relationship to the American academy, it remains an irony that Stevens has become in time “an almost exclusively academic poet” (Eeckhout, *Wallace Stevens and the Limits* 16). While the poet’s exclusive presence in the academy may represent a troubling enclosure, however, lectures nonetheless show how that presence can challenge the assumptions behind modern secular society’s separation of fact and value. A poet’s address to the academy hints at the possible ways in which the poet’s role may once again become a truly public one.

* * *

In 1954, a year before his death from stomach cancer, Stevens was invited by Archibald MacLeish to be the Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard for 1955-6. Not wanting to give up the routine of his work as an insurance lawyer, Stevens declined the invitation “with the greatest regret.” In his reply, he mentioned that he had sought “to find out whether it is possible to formulate a theory of poetry that would make poetry a significant humanity . . . that could be established as a normal, vital field of study for all comers.” “Someone else will have to do the job,” he concluded (*L* 853).

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Notes

¹ For further discussion of the response to this new “imaginary,” see Mutter, especially 31.

² Tom Eysers explores this idea in his comparison of Stevens with Alain Badiou: “A poem that never reaches words, that has everything to do with things-in-themselves, is as much a fantasy as a theory of poetic language as that which would ‘chaffer’ the time away entirely within its own solipsistic bounds, indifferent to the density of things. To hold oneself within such false terms is to evade poetry in the fullness of its consequences” (102).

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