

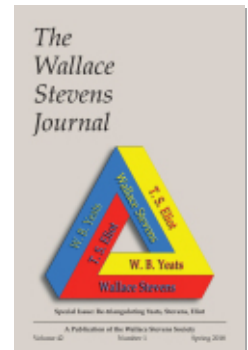


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Tony Sharpe

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“Dead Opposites” or “Reconciled among the Stars”? Stevens and Eliot

TONY SHARPE

MOST CRITICS have agreed that Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot had little affinity as poets, and this probably reflects a conclusion they reached themselves. In 1950, Stevens corrected William Van O'Connor's supposition that he knew Eliot slightly, insisting that they'd never met nor corresponded and protesting, "After all, Eliot and I are dead opposites and I have been doing about everything that he would not be likely to do" (*L* 677). O'Connor had misread an Eliot-themed issue of *The Harvard Advocate* (December 1938), attributing to him Allen Tate's contribution; Stevens actually wrote a rather more qualified "Homage to T. S. Eliot," noting that "His prodigious reputation is a great difficulty," and consequently asserting the need to read Eliot "out of the pew, so to speak" (*CPP* 801). In 1940, ruminating on the possibility of establishing a "Chair of Poetry" with his new acquaintance Henry Church (its potential funder) and envisaging the level of eminence necessary to its holder, Stevens thought of Eliot again, but was dismissive: "It is possible that a man like T. S. Eliot illustrates the character, except that I regard him as a negative rather than a positive force" (*CPP* 806–07). His covering letter to Church had argued that the post required "a scholar, or, perhaps better, a man with an extremely aggressive mind" (*L* 376): possibly Eliot might have been aggressive enough, but evidently not in the right way. For his part, Eliot noticed Stevens a good deal less than Stevens noticed Eliot, and when in 1955 Faber and Faber published *The Collected Poems*, Eliot had heralded the event by a statement in *The Trinity Review* (1954) that was hardly fulsome in its praise—despite his claim to be an "admirer"—and, in its assessment of Stevens's current standing, perhaps even had an air of speaking *de haut en bas*. "[H]is reputation is beginning to spread," noted the Nobel laureate, whose own reputation had been judged "prodigious" sixteen years previously, while also revealing that the idea of his firm's publishing Stevens had actually originated with "one of my fellow directors" (qtd. in Ehrenpreis 212).

Stevens, then, had a certain investment in asserting his difference from Eliot, and Eliot seems not to have bothered greatly about Stevens. If the latter was not personally acquainted with Eliot, he did have friendly

relations (of his kind) with Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore. In fact, the nature of Stevens's objection to Eliot's unquestioned reputation, and his perception of its negative consequences, was later replicated in something he wrote about Frost in a letter to Church's widow, Barbara. In this, he noted having declined an invitation to attend a celebration to mark Frost's eightieth birthday; he recalled having been confronted by Frost's bust in the rare book library at Harvard "some years ago," and went on to comment, "His work is full (or said to be full) of humanity. I suppose I shall never be eighty no matter how old I become" (L 825). Stevens's attitude in each case was driven by his feeling that a certain type of public approbation—Eliot's "complete acceptance" or Frost's being "greatly admired by many people" (CPP 801, L 825)—was an impediment that he himself, intending never to be installed as an eighty-year-old smiling public man, had avoided. He distrusted what he saw as Frost's heart-on-sleeve "humanity" as much as he distrusted Eliot's churchiness, which required taking him "out of the pew" as a necessary response; for the unexamined poem was not worth reading.

We might see this as little more than ill-disguised professional envy of two poets much more in the limelight than he was himself. But there is a consistent logic in Stevens's attitude, which I feel was defined less by envy than by his sense that a certain kind of "success" entailed a damaging falsification of the work, because it polluted poetic motive and, ensuingly, poetic reception. He would not want readers to confuse what he inclined to see as Eliot's pietism with his own particular piety, stated and defended in a letter to Hi Simons of 1944: "I write poetry because it is part of my piety: because, for me, it is the good of life, and I don't intend to lift a finger to advance my interest, because I don't want to think of poetry that way" (L 473). If Stevens regarded Eliot as a "negative" force, it was less because he wished he had himself achieved comparable success and more because in his view Eliot—whose rise to prominence, like Frost's, had been a consistent objective, tactically pursued—ultimately sold poetry short by underestimating its potential centrality and importance. Eliot, after all, as early as 1928 had relegated poetry to being "a superior amusement" (P 3: 414).¹ This has a very different ring from defining it as "the supreme fiction," as Stevens had already done in "To a High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (itself a preliminary salvo against the worldview Eliot would endorse) (CPP 47). Similarly, the Eliot who could concede in *East Coker* that "The poetry does not matter" (PTSE 1: 187) differs markedly from the Stevens who at the end of his career would assert that "Our belief in the greatness of poetry is a vital part of its greatness, an implicit part of the belief of others in its greatness" (CPP 877).

Stevens's other friends in American poetry, Williams and Moore, for each of whom he wrote amiable appreciations, themselves also had marked—and markedly different—responses to Eliot. Moore's was consistently respectful and admiring, and Williams's was as consistently hostile and

dismissive. Although it is clear that Stevens maintained a critical distance from Eliot, I think it is a mistake to suppose that his attitude replicated Williams's antagonism, even if he did not entirely share Moore's respect. In what follows, I want to investigate the grounds on which some scholars have supposed that to have been the case, and to explore the nature of the similarities and dissimilarities between Stevens and Eliot, as well as the ways in which the writing of each engages with the other's. Generically, both can be seen as modernists who disclaimed the movement: by 1928, Eliot was already associating himself with "Those of us who lay no claim to being modern" (*P* 3: 459), and Stevens in one of the "Adagia" reminded himself that "One cannot spend one's time in being modern when there are so many more important things to be" (*CPP* 912).

Certainly, there were biographical aspects in which they were not dead opposites. Both were American-born and Harvard-educated; both contracted lastingly unhappy marriages of which their families disapproved (neither Eliot's parents nor Stevens's attended their sons' weddings); both had problematical relations with their fathers. These unhappy circumstances, despite the privacy each militantly preserved during his lifetime, seem to have prompted certain revelations in their poetry (the wife with bad nerves in *The Waste Land*, the woman addressed by "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," for obvious instances), and even produce sporadic tonal similarities. For example, matrimonial desolation and thwarted emotional impulse seem to underlie each of the following passages:

Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.
(*PTSE* 1: 82)

This comes from Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (III), and this, from Stevens's "Yellow Afternoon":

But he came back as one comes back from the sun
To lie on one's bed in the dark, close to a face
Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.
(*CPP* 216)

Stevens's poem was written considerably later than Eliot's, but I am not suggesting influence so much perhaps as momentary confluence of feeling. Reversing this order of composition, there are also points of comparison to be drawn between lines occurring in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) and *East Coker* (1940):

Slowly the ivy on the stones
Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields
And men in waves become the sea.
(CPP 139–40)

This has some similarity to the cycles of transformational decay and regeneration evoked in Eliot's poem, and in particular to its summary: "The houses are all gone under the sea. // The dancers are all gone under the hill" (PTSE 1: 188). In the next section of *East Coker*, I also wonder whether Eliot's phrase "As, in a theatre" (PTSE 1: 188) prompted the title of Stevens's late poem "As at a Theatre."

These are, however, notional concurrences. Less speculative connections almost entirely involve Stevens's awareness of Eliot, rather than the other way around. Eliot said he could only be certain that James Joyce had read his poem "The Hippopotamus," and similarly, the only poem of Stevens's that we can be certain Eliot knew was "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," since he alluded to it in the title of the final lecture on the course he taught at Harvard in the spring of 1933: "Lewis; and Finale of Seem" (P 4: 792). His surviving notes contain no further specific elaboration of the reference, however, nor do they cite Stevens by name. Stevens, of course, did cite Eliot by name in "Effects of Analogy" (1948), quoting thirteen lines from "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" in answer to his own question "Is not Eliot a musical poet?" (CPP 719). Whether there was any intended irony in using a poem first published three decades previously (in *Blast!*, 1915), perhaps to imply that Eliot *was* rather than *is* a "musical poet," must be uncertain; but Eliot's poem may linger somewhere behind Stevens's formulation (from 1936): "The moon / Burns in the mind on lost remembrances" (CPP 173). In "Effects of Analogy," his appreciation of the musical qualities he defines seems genuine—and this is worth noting, because the association between Eliot and music Stevens enunciated in 1948 has been taken by some to justify reading "The Creations of Sound" (1944) as a direct critique of Eliot (its first line being "If the poetry of X was music" [CPP 274]). Harold Bloom states confidently, in several places, that the poem is "written against Eliot, who appears in it as X."²

I find this unpersuasive, since it rests either on a straightforward misunderstanding of what Stevens's poem seems to say about "X," or attributes to it a catastrophically imperipient view of Eliot's poetry. For a start, "The Creations of Sound" makes reasonably clear that the problem with the poetry that "X" writes is that it is *not* music, since the faults seemingly attributed to it and to him—he "is an obstruction, a man / Too exactly himself," whose poems "do not make the visible a little hard // To see" (CPP 274, 275)—would be remedied if his poetry *were* more like music, in its occurrences. In short, unlike the Eliot Stevens would describe in his

lecture, "X" is expressly not "a musical poet." The poem has interpretive issues that I have not space to address—such as whether there is a critical difference between poems coming "out of the wall // Or in the ceiling" and those rising "From the floor" (if they do); and whether, similarly, we should differentiate saying ourselves "in poems" from saying ourselves "in speech we do not speak," or whether the two should ideally be the same (CPP 274–75). But the nature of its critique of "X," who seems too much present as a person in his poetry, which in turn becomes too much a function of his wish and will, and overcommitted to reality as what-is-visible, is one that constitutes him very differently from the Eliot who was notorious for insisting on a doctrine of poetic "impersonality" that, indeed, Stevens's poem seems also to advance in its closing lines.

"X, the per-noble master," associated with the "old world" and "The lean cats of the arches of the churches" in part III of "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (CPP 229–30), seems more plausibly understood as possibly alluding to the expatriated Eliot who stated, in a 1927 review in *The Dial* that it is quite possible Stevens had read, "If I believe, as I do believe, that the chief distinction of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever, Mr. [I. A.] Richards' theory of value is inadequate" (P 3: 46). But, even if justified here, this does not oblige us to carry the identification forward to the later poem: for in poetry as in algebra, "x" is a variable unassigned quantity. Stevens's own "theory of value" was more or less antithetical to the one Eliot enunciated in 1927, and his persistent association of Eliot with ancient churches and an outmoded, intrinsically hierarchical Christianity doubtless threw into sharper relief his own credal emancipation. Where he could, he turned Eliot's words against him, as when (in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction") we read, "It is the celestial ennui of apartments / That sends us back to the first idea" (CPP 330)—a formulation that seems to echo "Milton's celestial and infernal regions are large but insufficiently furnished apartments filled by heavy conversation" (P 2: 190). This occurs in Eliot's 1920 essay on William Blake collected in *The Sacred Wood*, a volume Stevens probably knew. Eliot's sentence continues, "and one remarks about the Puritan mythology its thinness" (P 2: 190); I shall try to suggest, later, that Stevens would certainly be concerned to show how the "thinness" or poverty of a "mythology" might have to be constructed as its virtue, in the context of New England.

If that is a point at which I believe Stevens made a private allusion to Eliot—and "Notes" has been seen by various critics in relation to Eliot's *Quartets*³—then I believe he more openly alludes to Eliot at the end of "Crude Foyer," in ways connecting with issues surrounding the nature of America and the nature of place, which seem to offer more significant grounds of differentiation between the two than the "you-are-a-Christian-I-am-not" antithesis along which Stevens himself tended to construct their divergence. In the third of his *Quartets*, *The Dry Salvages* (1941), Eliot chooses an American location and instructs readers on the correct

American pronunciation of its name. The poem's first American publication was in *Partisan Review* (May-June 1941); it is not improbable that Stevens read it there, but we can be confident that he was familiar with *Four Quartets*, which—as a sequence in which Eliot's Christianity becomes ever more central—doubtless intensified his sense of the gulf between them. But there may have been a slightly different cause of offense in *The Dry Salvages*: that poem, written and published well before the attack on Pearl Harbor and American entry into World War II, laid a claim on America on the part of one who was a kind of renegade, having publicly adopted British citizenship in 1927.

Eliot's poem ends with these lines, resigned to the modest spiritual attainments that are the lot "For most of us":

We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.
(*PTSE* 1: 200)

This ending, Helen Gardner showed (147–49), had caused Eliot problems, and there is a body of critical opinion (starting with Donald Davie, but also including Denis Donoghue) that regards this poem as the weakest of the sequence. Later in the 1940s, Stevens wrote "Crude Foyer," a short poem that, at its primary level, seems also to reconcile itself to the shortfall between aspiration (that through "thought" we could sufficiently transcend the circumstantial to inhabit "A foyer of the spirit in a landscape / Of the mind" [*CPP* 270]) and our reliance on actuality, defined at its close:

We are ignorant men incapable
Of the least, minor, vital metaphor, content,
At last, there, when it turns out to be here.
(*CPP* 270)

In these lines, we can hear the hint of a retort to *The Dry Salvages*, as Eliot's "We, content at the last" re-emerges in Stevens's "We . . . content, / At last, there. . . ." Unlike the more private allusion to the essay on Blake, I incline to think Stevens hoped the reader might register this—and, given the "complete acceptance" *Four Quartets* had already achieved by this stage as well as the memorable awkwardness of Eliot's phrase, this would not have been unreasonable.

But if so, why? I suggest that this shows Stevens as a more penetrating reader of Eliot than is provided by the unconvincing example of "The Creations of Sound." In *The Dry Salvages*, Eliot, by this stage a professedly loyal subject of King George VI, evoked his own American origins through images of the Mississippi (he had been born in St. Louis, Missouri) and the

New England coast, remembering boyhood sailing expeditions from the family summer residence near Gloucester, Massachusetts. These expeditions had taken him as far as Casco Bay, Cape Ann, which contributed significantly to the final poem of *Ash-Wednesday* and to "Marina" (both 1930). To some extent, this third *Quartet* was the culmination of his American remembering, and I suppose that, in the context of Eliot's emigration, his return in imagination to the country he had left behind was appreciatively received by many American readers. But not, I suspect, by Stevens, who may have noticed that, unlike the places titling the other three *Quartets*, "the Dry Salvages" were uninhabitable and therefore unhistoried (in fact, they imply the prehistorical), were etymologically related to "savages," and, as with the Mississippi, were capriciously and indiscriminately destructive. The poem's close seems to look elegiacally toward an English country churchyard, and its final line encapsulates precisely what has been missing from the American places evoked, as it turns back toward England in the final *Quartet*, *Little Gidding*, where "History is now and England" (*PTSE* 1: 208).⁴

In doing so, Eliot's theory of value disregarded the minimal sublime that Stevens felt America embodied, and that constituted his own precious resource. "Crude Foyer" is a poem made grammatically intricate and interpretively challenging by its extending a single sentence across five four-line stanzas; but, thinking like Eliot's poem about "landscape" and its relation to "spirit," it discriminates between a false place and a true one. It also mounts its own "critique of paradise" as a delusionary destination that turns out always to be intimately related to where we imagine it from (*CPP* 270), which is where, in the lines quoted above, we inevitably and gratefully end up. This somewhat resembles Eliot's conclusion in *Little Gidding*, that "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (*PTSE* 1: 208); but in Stevens's riposte—in which I sense a degree of anger, of frustration—there may be an implication that Eliot does not really "know the place," if that place is America, and that the project of expatriation that has been the result of his estrangement from it has led him to substitute a false "there" for a truer "here."

Although I think that this poem has greater claim than "The Creations of Sound" to be read as "written against Eliot," I would not wish to cast it simply within that adversarial role. Nonetheless, its "there/here" dichotomy, if understood to include reference to the America that one of them had permanently left and where the other permanently resided, highlights the nature of their responses as offering ground for difference (perhaps fueling Stevens's resentment when Eliot posed as an American in *The Dry Salvages*?). To define this further, I turn to their prose, and move beyond any inference that the examples to be offered were part of an implied conversation.

Stevens, who wrote a poem called "Description Without Place" and who, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," could describe the sea as "merely a place by which she walked to sing" (*CPP* 105), might be represented as indifferent to location by comparison with Eliot, who not only composed a suite of poems called "Landscapes," but whose final major poems evoked particular places. Nonetheless, I want to propose that, for Eliot, "place" was a more intermediate category than it finally was for Stevens. In his closing Norton lecture (March 1933), Eliot offered some personal reflections (themselves unusual, in the context of his habitual impersonality) that have subsequently become well-known:

Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water-mill: such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer. (*P* 4: 688)

This concerns "place" as a component rather than as the constituent of significant recall, but it is noteworthy that Eliot, returning to America as a literary celebrity, offers specifically European examples of particular places: "on a German mountain path," "at a small French railway junction." For comparison, here is part of Stevens's 1948 appreciation "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean." "To be a Ransom in Tennessee is something more precious than it is easy to say," he asserted (*CPP* 819), going on, in a prose passage of unusual power and what seems like unguardedness, to evoke a passionate relation to place:

One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves, to which one is really and essentially native, to demand that it surrender, reveal, that in itself which one loves. This is a vital affair, not an affair of the heart (as it may be in one's first poems), but an affair of the whole being (as in one's last poems), a fundamental affair of life, or, rather, an affair of fundamental life; so that one's cry of O Jerusalem becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience. This is why trivial things often touch us intensely. It is why the sight of an old berry patch, a new growth in the woods in the spring, the particular things on display at a farmers' market, as, for

example, the trays of poor apples, the few boxes of black-eyed peas, the bags of dried corn, have an emotional power over us that for a moment is more than we can control. (CPP 820)

It might be said that each piece resembles a prose version of a poem each might have written (or did write). Stevens's, however, is written at a pitch of intensity relatively unusual for him in this medium, and seems unusually confessional.⁵ The similarity between the extracts is that each poet enumerates things seen that have affected him; but the differences are marked.

The tone of Eliot's is interrogative and speculative, starting from the question "Why is it?" and continuing through its accumulated instances to the tentative conclusion "It may be that . . ." Stevens's tone is declarative, opening with assertions that are reinforced by an accumulation of certainties set down in almost desperate desire to access the truth, leading from this to the explanatory "This is why," itself substantiated by concrete specification that presumes (as indeed Eliot's does) to speak "for all of us." Whereas Eliot seems content with his inability to explain the emotional charge contained by the items on his list—perhaps implying it is preferable there should be these "depths of feeling into which we cannot peer," which are the source of poetry—Stevens insists on explanation of the "emotional power" of "trivial things." "There are men," he goes on to say, "who must understand them, who isolate them in order to understand them" (CPP 820). Yet we might wonder whether, finally, Eliot was *so* unsure, and whether Stevens was *so* certain (Tennessee, after all, had been the location for his legendarily gnomic "Anecdote of the Jar").

Eliot's list might initially seem so random as to defy explanation, but it also seems as if its items' common emotional affect in fact subsumes them into a category of the coherent—so that we may finally be struck less by the heterogeneity of the vehicles by which this power manifests itself than by their homogeneity in this function. Their final effect, then, may be of affirming an underlying unity in fortuity. Stevens, as it were in reverse, moves from general principle to specific examples, which, unlike Eliot's, are a kind of savagely reduced romantic catalogue (each item derives from nature). But if "one's cry" turns away from "Jerusalem" toward "something . . . nearer," "a living name, a living place," "in crying out [one] confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience." ("Large Red Man Reading," contemporary with this piece, is relevant here.) The bitterness, presumably, is produced by the thwarted longing for something more, resulting in ferocious desire that what there actually *is*, here, now, should disclose itself and should suffice—although such desire equally provokes awareness of what he elsewhere termed "the dumbfounding abyss / Between us and the object" (CPP 375) as we try to love those "black-eyed peas" or "bags of dried corn." Which of you, when your child asks for

bread, would give him a stone? But this is what Mother Earth tends to do, in later Stevens (or, even worse, as in "Madame La Fleurie").

Eliot's passage privileges mystery. This might itself lead to the sense that all is ultimately explicable by God, that "Man's accidents are God's purposes" (as Sophia Hawthorne etched on her husband's windowpane), and that the mystery therefore becomes a token of divine potentiality. Stevens's passage privileges what he so often termed "poverty" (although he does not here), and in the context of America their reactions to this were very different, as two further examples will serve to illustrate. Eliot's return to America in 1932, his first visit since 1915, had not seemed like a homecoming but an alienation, as a long letter he wrote to Geoffrey Faber in late September 1932 showed. Some of his impressions (omitting disadvantageous comparisons between New England and Europe) were recycled in *After Strange Gods* (1934), based on the lectures he went on to deliver at the University of Virginia after leaving Harvard. I cite this here because it is possible Stevens could have read it, although whether he did or not does not affect my argument:

My local feelings were stirred very sadly by my first view of New England, on arriving from Montreal, and journeying all one day through the beautiful desolate country of Vermont. Those hills had once, I suppose, been covered with primaevial forest; the forest was razed to make sheep pastures for the English settlers; now the sheep are gone, and most of the descendants of the settlers; and a new forest appeared blazing with the melancholy glory of October maple and beech and birch scattered among the evergreens; and after this procession of scarlet and gold and purple wilderness you descend to the sordor of the half-dead mill towns of southern New Hampshire and Massachusetts. It is not necessarily those lands which are the most fertile or most favoured in climate that seem to me the happiest, but those in which a long struggle of adaptation between man and his environment has brought out the best qualities of both; in which the landscape has been moulded by numerous generations of one race, and in which the landscape in turn has modified the race to its own character. And those New England mountains seemed to me to give evidence of a human success so meagre and transitory as to be more desperate than the desert. (ASG 17)

As he had written to Faber, "you feel that every house and sign of human life might be swept away and leave exactly the same inhuman natural beauty that was there before" (*Letters* 459): emphatically, Eliot had not felt that "History" was then and America.

Twenty years later, near the end of his life, Stevens had occasion to express his own "local feelings," which were very different:

The other day, early in April, when the weather was still bleak and everything still had the look of winter, I went from Hartford to Boston, on the railroad by way of Willimantic. Everything seemed gray, bleached and derelict and the word derelict kept repeating itself as part of the activity of the train. But this was a precious ride through the character of the state. The soil everywhere seemed thin and difficult and every cutting and open pit disclosed gravel and rocks, in which only the young pine trees seemed to do well. There were chicken farms, some of them abandoned, and there were cow-barns. The great barns of other states do not exist. There were orchards of apples and peaches. Yet in this sparse landscape with its old houses of gray and white there were other houses, smaller, fresher, more fastidious.

And spring was coming on. It was as if the people whose houses I was seeing shared the strength that was beginning to assert itself. The man who loves New England and particularly the spare region of Connecticut loves it precisely because of the spare colors, the thin lights, the delicacy and slightness of the beauty of the place. The dry grass on the thin surfaces would soon change to a lime-like green and later to an emerald brilliant in a sunlight never too full. . . . Now, when all the primitive difficulties of getting started have been overcome, we live in the tradition which is the true mythology of the region and we breathe in with every breath the joy of having ourselves been created by what has been endured and mastered in the past. (*CPP* 894–95)

This comes from "Connecticut Composed," the last prose that Stevens wrote before the onset of his final illness. If its valedictory tone reflects something of that sense of an oncoming ending, then the personal contexts of Eliot's comments (he had finally separated from his wife, Vivienne, and was contemplating a life of spiritual austerity) are also relevant. So, too, are the larger contexts, with Eliot reflecting on what was Depression-era America, while Stevens writes from within the postwar resurgence and menaced tranquilities of Eisenhower's presidency. The heavily ideologized nature of both pieces also owes something to their contexts: Eliot was addressing himself sympathetically to the Southern Agrarian political and cultural sensibility, and Stevens's tribute had been commissioned by the United States Information Agency for broadcast on the Voice of America.⁶ Neither, then, can be entirely disentangled from somewhat pro-

pagandist motives; but here I want simply to consider the “America” each postulates, in order to define their differences.

These might be summarized as follows: whereas Eliot’s passage sees New England as the nothing that is not there, Stevens’s passage sees it as the nothing that is; what one expresses as deprivation, the other embraces as resource. We are, in some aspects, back at the division Henry James insisted on in his study of Hawthorne (1879) when asserting that “the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature,” and when enumerating “the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life” (23, 55). But even James admitted that, all such deficiencies accounted for, “The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret” (56). When James contemplates Hawthorne’s “circumstances”—“struck,” he confesses, by “the large number of elements that were absent from them”—he comments that “the coldness, the thinness, the blankness . . . present themselves so vividly” (55); and I abbreviate the quotation at his animating adverb to emphasize its predictively Stevensian aspect, as “One feels the life of that which gives life as it is” (*CPP* 460). This is the tenor of Stevens’s perception of Connecticut: that its absences have amounted to opportunity, as he celebrates the limitations of its palette and the “hardihood” this has instilled: “the American self in the sort of place in which it was formed” (*CPP* 896). Unlike Eliot, who sees virtual failure in this poverty, Stevens, in on the Jamesian “secret,” sees success (and not “meagre” success, as Eliot terms it), albeit through an effort that may have been grimly “Required, as a necessity requires” (*CPP* 428). Out of it, he argues, has been created that “mythology of the region,” that enduring linkage between self and place, and that live tradition, which Eliot had felt to have been missing.

This brings me back to my earlier assertion, that Stevens puts more pressure on location than Eliot does, or that ultimately it matters less to Eliot. This in turn relates to my observation, about the first set of passages, that Eliot seems content with the mystery he diagnoses, whereas Stevens forces toward understanding, interrogating the particulars for an answer they can give only by being irreducibly what they are. In the second set of passages, Eliot already has an alternative in mind to the New England that disappoints him, whether it is figured as Europe or even as the life hereafter; but for Stevens, the hard truth of Connecticut, the state where, as he sees, rock lies so close to the surface, is what there is. Their perceptions of place cannot ultimately be detached from their different religious positions. I do not wish to simplify Eliot’s Christianity, which was highly complex, sophisticated, and dark; but for all that, the Christian understanding is that we are God’s privileged (if unworthy) creatures, on earth as the place intended for us in preparation for enjoying God forever in an afterlife (or missing him eternally, Eliot might add, in Hell). In a late address, Stevens insisted on the importance of a poet’s remember-

ing “that he lives in the world of Darwin and not in the world of Plato” (CPP 878); in that perspective, our species is the consequence of natural rather than supernatural selection. God’s earth must, logically, contain God’s meanings, even if these are occult; but God’s vanishing from earth means that the meaning of our being here is not discoverable, but must be manufactured from what lies at hand. This is the “fantastic effort” on which Stevens embarked (CPP 428), and that Eliot to some extent derided: “Man is man because he can recognize spiritual realities, not because he can invent them” (P 3: 617).

In *Little Gidding* (III), Eliot implies that “love of a country,” as “attachment to our own field of action,” can in the “expanding / Of love beyond desire” come to seem “of little importance / Though never indifferent” (PTSE 1: 206). But, for Stevens, being located in a “meaningless place” necessitates the finding of a satisfaction in it, nevertheless (CPP 388), rather than in any transcendence of it, such as Eliot implies through “the timeless moment” (PTSE 1: 202). This requires forging a relation to one’s location, however depleted it seems (“the empty place”), through specific perception: “There was that difference between the and an, / The difference between himself and no man” (CPP 230). Attachment to our own field of action is always vital, for when the necessary angel descends, it directs our attention more profoundly toward “earth” than toward “empty heaven and its hymns” (CPP 423, 137). When the visionary moment occurs in Stevens, it is transitory, like Eliot’s; but, in a manifestation of secular grace, it offers intensification rather than transcendence of the ordinary, as in “Contrary Theses (II)”: “The abstract was suddenly there and gone again. / The negroes were playing football in the park” (CPP 242). Instead of the universe of death suggested by phrases like “chemical afternoon,” “grand mechanics,” and “martyrs à la mode” (CPP 241–42), the poem’s various observed parts—including, in my reading, these football players—are seen to make a living whole, in which “the world itself was the truth” (CPP 221). Connecticut, if you like, has to be “composed,” and on such occasions as this the principle of harmony implicit in the act of composition suggests itself: “Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake, // A composing as the body tires” (CPP 333). For the “living name” and the “living place” are closely interconnected: “The thing I hum appears to be / The rhythm of this celestial pantomime” (CPP 221).

But more usual in Stevens are “balances / That we achieve” rather than “balances that happen” (CPP 334), much like poems that, while they “may very well occur, they had very much better be caused” (L 274). This marks a difference from the Eliot who espoused impersonality and who seems in practice to have required something like inspiration in order to write poetry. For Stevens, the actively discriminating poet was an essential component; copying out a remark about the “exactness and intensity of [Cézanne’s] notation,” he commented, “I note the above both for itself and because it adds to subject and manner the thing that is incessantly over-

looked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matters much" (*Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects* 53, 55). This may return us to their being "dead opposites." But if Eliot might have thought of Stevens as a belated and semi-irrelevant romantic deploying a used-up category of "the imagination," and Stevens thought of Eliot as a belated and semi-irrelevant Christian deploying a used-up category of "God," Eliot has also been conscripted to the romantic tradition by various commentators, and the question of religious belief is clearly central to Stevens.⁷ In 1938, what Stevens had found to applaud in Eliot was his asceticism, and for both poets a kind of negative theology, a sense of the world defined by God's actual or potential absence, was deeply significant. Both men behaved astonishingly, in their final phases: Eliot risked outraging the social decorum by which he had appeared confined, by marrying his much younger secretary in a secret ceremony; Stevens, also secretly, seems to have become a Roman Catholic on his deathbed (though the veracity of this conversion is contested). Neither event need be interpreted as the repudiation of previously held positions: for Eliot, it extended his understanding of "love" to include human sexuality; for Stevens, it shows the ultimate consistency of his belief in belief. For Eliot, it was impossible to "Let be be finale of seem" (*CPP* 50), because the anticipated final consummation reconciled natural and divine, when "the fire and the rose are one" (*PTSE* 1: 209); for Stevens, however, "It is possible that to seem—it is to be" (*CPP* 296), that consummation experienced when "observing is completing and we are content, / In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole" (*CPP* 298). Not "dead opposites," therefore, but certainly very different. Yet, more than a half-century after their deaths, each has a durable reputation, so in the notional Pantheon of modern poets we might justifiably regard them, now, as being "reconciled among the stars" (*PTSE* 1: 181).⁸ And, possibly, during life each might have turned to the other's poetry with the outcome predicted by their mutual friend, Marianne Moore: "Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine" (36).

Lancaster University
United Kingdom

Notes

¹Eliot's prose will be cited, as far as possible, from the ongoing *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* (5 volumes to date) as *P* 1 (volume number as appropriate). Analogously, references to Eliot's poetry will cite the two-volume "Annotated Text" of *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* as *PTSE* 1. All references to *After Strange Gods* will be cited as *ASG*.

²This example comes from Bloom, *Poets and Poems* 259; see also Bloom, *Wallace Stevens* 151–52 and *The Ringers in the Tower* 37.

³These have included Sister Bernetta Quinn, A. A. Alvarez, Denis Donoghue, and Lucy Beckett, to name no others.

⁴Here and later I extend aspects of my argument in “Hello, Hello.”

⁵Stevens seems to be evoking his own feelings rather than ventriloquizing Ransom’s; Alan Filreis has noted that in its first draft he even supposed Ransom to have been born in Kentucky (72).

⁶As Eliot writes, “I think that the chances for the re-establishment of a native culture are perhaps better here than in New England. You are farther away from New York; you have been less industrialised and less invaded by foreign races; and you have a more opulent soil” (ASG 16).

⁷Randall Jarrell, C. K. Stead, George Bornstein, and Michael O’Neill come to mind. For a fuller exploration of my views on Stevens and belief, see my essay “Religion.”

⁸I acknowledge that there is also a regrettable comparison to be drawn between them, if we consider them amid “the racilogies of canonical modernism” (Galvin 293); while this tarnishes their stars, it does not in my view extinguish them.

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