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The Meaning of the Earth and the Will of Men:  
Re-examining the Nietzschean in Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*

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**The Meaning of the Earth and the Will of Men:  
Re-examining the Nietzschean in Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*.**

**A Dissertation**

**by**

**Gaye Elizabeth Taylor**

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It must be an odd civilization in which poetry is not the equal of philosophy.

(Wallace Stevens to Henry Church, October 15, 1940)

## Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with re-examining “the Nietzschean” in Wallace Stevens’ first book of poems, *Harmonium* (1923). In the final decades of the twentieth-century, such critics as Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Joseph Riddell, Milton Bates, and B. J. Leggett discovered deep and abiding affinities between Nietzsche’s thought and Stevens’ poetry. While never denying the existence of a Nietzschean creative will in Stevens, my dissertation argues for significant zones of ambivalence towards Nietzsche’s thought in Stevens’ poetry, particularly towards the Nietzschean valuation of “the meaning of the earth.” Significantly guided by B. J. Leggett’s readings of Nietzschean intertexts in a number of Stevens’ early poems, the second and third chapters of this dissertation seek to supplement—and to complicate—the idea of a Nietzschean will to creative power in Stevens by marking the ways in which these poems extend Nietzsche’s mandate by assigning creative agency first to women, and then to “the common man.” The last two chapters of the dissertation, however, strike a more independent course, arguing that a number of famous early poems, such as “Sunday Morning” and “The Snow Man,” but especially the long poem, “The Comedian as the Letter C,” demonstrate that working against an investment in a Nietzschean will to creative power was Stevens’ adamant conviction that the limiting function of the earth itself in all its guttural materiality ensured that the outcome of the will to imagine could only ever be, at best, “*sufficient*”—never self-surpassing.

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## Abbreviations

### Wallace Stevens

- CPP *The Collected Poetry and Prose of Wallace Stevens*  
CS *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie.*  
L *Letters of Wallace Stevens*  
OP *Opus Posthumous*  
SM *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo.*  
SP *Souvenirs and Prophecies*

### Friedrich Nietzsche

- BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*  
BT *The Birth of Tragedy*  
DD *The Dawn of Day*  
GM *The Genealogy of Morals*  
GS *The Gay Science*  
OTF *“On Truth and Falsity in their Non-Moral Sense”*  
SL *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche.*  
TI *The Twilight of the Idols*  
WP *The Will to Power*  
Z *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

Introduction: The Alp at the End of the Street.

IX

*Statue against a Clear Sky*

Ashen man on ashen cliff above the salt halloo,  
O ashen admiral of the hard, hale blue. . . .

X

*Statue against a Cloudy Sky*

Scaffolds and derricks rise from the reeds to the clouds  
Meditating the will of men in formless crowds.

(Wallace Stevens, "New England Verses," 1923)

Wallace Stevens was notoriously reluctant to acknowledge his creative influences and his poetic allusions are almost always subtle and open to varying interpretations. In his entire poetic corpus there are only two lines that unequivocally and obviously allude to Friedrich Nietzsche: the reference to "Nietzsche in Basel" gazing into a pool in "Description Without Place" (1945) and the use of the word "Übermenschlichkeit" in "The Surprises of the Superhuman," a poem from the "Lettres d'un Soldat" sequence (1917). Yet a number of influential critics have repeatedly drawn the poet and the philosopher together in complex constellations, Harold Bloom, for example, identifying Nietzsche as one of Stevens' essential "influences." While eschewing the very concept of literary influence, others, notably J. Hillis

Miller and Joseph Riddel (in their later work as deconstructionists, that is), and B. J. Leggett in his *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (1992), have offered rigorous explorations of intertextual relation between Stevens and Nietzsche. Rounding out a broad spectrum of “Nietzschean” critics are Milton Bates, whose *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (1985) estimates that “[n]owhere else in Stevens does one have an intellectual influence whose sources and extent can be specified with as much certainty” (248), and J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton, co-authors of *The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality* (1988), who believe Nietzsche, that is, “particularly the later and increasingly flamboyant Nietzsche of *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” to operate as Stevens’ “poetic precursor even more than philosophical influence” (xi).

Extending Bates’ careful explication of the Nietzschean aspects of the poet’s “major man,” Leonard and Wharton discover “a range of other Nietzschean themes apparent in Stevens’ figurations—including the ‘three metamorphoses,’ ‘death of God,’ solar images, and ‘eternal recurrence’” (103-4). According to Leonard and Wharton, “No poet has dealt with these Nietzschean figures as explicitly, persistently, and insightfully as Stevens (in prose, and from his earliest major poems—“Sunday Morning” and “Peter Quince”—to the last)” (104). Bringing to bear an impressive range of citations from Stevens’ corpus, Leonard and Wharton build a persuasive case that their poet was “influenced” by Nietzsche. It seems likely, for example, that the opening lines in section V of “It Must Be Abstract” in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”—“The lion roars at the enraging desert, / Reddens the sand with his red-colored noise, / Defies red emptiness to evolve his match”—do “directly appropriat[e]” (113) Zarathustra’s proclamation that “in the loneliest wilderness happeneth the second metamorphosis: here the

spirit becometh a lion; freedom will it capture, and lordship in its own wilderness” (Z I i). So, too, might the phrase “bright *scienza* outside ourselves” in “Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun” be “a direct allusion to ‘*la gaya scienza*,’ the Italian title under which *The Gay Science* was originally published” (Leonard and Wharton 123).

But the authors of *The Fluent Mundo* may be, nonetheless, too swift to discern an invariably positive trace in Stevens of what the poet himself called Nietzsche’s “formidable poetry.” After all, this striking assessment of Nietzsche’s works in the late essay “A Collect of Philosophy” (1951), which articulates Stevens’ sense of the difference between poetry and philosophy is not unalloyed praise: “When I say that writing in a poetic way is not the same thing as having ideas that are inherently poetic concepts, I mean that the formidable poetry of Nietzsche, for example, ultimately leaves us with the formidable poetry of Nietzsche and *little more*” (CPP 854, italics added). “Without arguing this last point” (xi), as they put it in their preface, Leonard and Wharton proceed with dispatch to “trace Stevens’ poetic incorporation / transformation . . . [of] Nietzschean tropes”(xi). While critics are certainly entitled to ignore authorial commentary—notorious as such commentary is for being unreliable—it is worth recalling that earlier in the same essay Stevens describes “inherently poetic” ideas as those which “giv[e] the imagination sudden life” (CPP 851). That Steven should thus implicitly deny Nietzsche’s “formidable poetry” the power to “give the imagination sudden life” has always been, for me, a sticking point.

Following Bloom, Leonard and Wharton identify echoes of *The Gay Science* in “Esthétique du Mal,” arguing that the poem’s celebration of the “yes [that is] spoken because under every no, / Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken” (viii) originates in



Nietzsche's proclamation to "the children of the future" that "[t]he hidden Yea in you is stronger than all Nos and Perhapses of which you and your age are sick" (*GS* 377). So, too, might we read further echoes of *The Gay Science*—"Build you cities on the slope of Vesuvius!" (283)—in the poem's opening canto which finds a young man writing letters home from Naples, with the volcano itself "groan[ing]" in the distance.<sup>1</sup> But even if we accept Nietzsche as "the presiding intelligence" (Bloom 226) of "Esthétique du Mal," there are places in the poem which seem to resist the presence of this "external master of knowledge."<sup>2</sup> It seems unlikely, for example, that Nietzsche "presides" freely over the poem's sixth canto which Helen Vendler describes as "an indulgent parable" revealing that although "the flawed was painful to Stevens, it was also attractive" (*On Extended Wings* 213). Vendler is surely correct to read the canto's opening as "both sympathetic and comic, as each sentence rises and then sprawls in collapse" (*ibid.*):

The sun, in clownish yellow, but not a clown  
Brings the day to perfection and then fails. He dwells  
In a consummate prime, yet still desires  
A further consummation. For the lunar month  
He makes the tenderest research, intent  
On a transmutation which, when seen, appears  
To be askew. And space is filled with his  
Rejected years. (1-8)

---

<sup>1</sup> And so, also, might we understand Stevens' mention of a "too, too human god" (III, 13), as deliberately recalling Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*.

<sup>2</sup> Stevens supplies this phrase as a gloss to the late poem, "The Sail of Ulysses."

This touchingly ineffectual and perennially dissatisfied solar bumpkin who next suffers the indignity of “a big bird peck[ing] at him for food” (8-9) either reads nothing like Nietzsche’s emblematic “great star!” (Z I, i)—or as a considerable parody of it.

In my first chapter, which presents a sketch of the state of the question on Stevens and Nietzsche, I begin with a reading of “Description Without Place”—a poem which Stevens composed especially for the Phi Beta Kappa commencement at Harvard in 1945. For Leonard and Wharton, this notoriously difficult text, which contains the sole explicit and direct reference to the philosopher in Stevens’ poetry, reveals “a subtle, affinitive understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy” (122), an opinion which, until very recently, shared in a wide-spread consensus that “Nietzsche in Basel” was a hero of Stevens’ imagination.<sup>3</sup> In my reading of the poem, I interpret the Nietzsche found therein as a far more ambivalent figure—indeed, as one who might give insight into Stevens’ judgement that the philosopher’s thoughts were “formidable poetry. . . and little more.” Keeping in view this late expression of ambivalence—clearly not formed in ignorance of the philosopher’s doctrines—my dissertation argues for zones of critical revision of—and resistance to—aspects of Nietzschean thought in the early Stevens. (Constrained by time and space, my focus here is on *Harmonium*, although I look briefly toward *Ideas of Order* in concluding.)

Building slowly towards my final chapter, which reads “The Comedian as the Letter C” as a mock-heroic tale of “*Übermenschlichkeit* Lost,” so to speak, my second and third chapters

---

<sup>3</sup> There has always been a minor strain of dissent. In one of the earliest monographs on Stevens’ work, *Images and Judgments* (1964), John Enck finds Nietzsche and Lenin to share “an arid singularity of purpose” (174). Discussed in my first chapter is Alison Rieke’s fine essay on “Description Without Place,” from the spring of 2009, which reexamines, and complicates, the “place” of Nietzsche in Stevens’ art.

revisit the question of a Nietzschean will-to-create in *Harmonium*, a subject brilliantly articulated, and explicated, by B. J. Leggett in his 1988 monograph, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*. While significantly guided by Leggett's readings of such poems as "Sunday Morning" and "The Surprises of the Superhuman," I seek to supplement—and to complicate—the idea of a Nietzschean creative will in Stevens by marking the ways in which these and other poems extend Nietzsche's mandate by assigning such creative agency first to women, and then to the "common man." Having considered at some length such variations on the theme of a Nietzschean creative will in the early Stevens—a will "striving to realize itself in knowing itself" (*CPP* 648) by way of making one's relation to the earth as original and immediate as possible, as he explained it in his mature essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"—I turn in my fourth chapter to the decidedly complicated question of what the earth meant to Stevens. Without proposing a comprehensive answer to this enigma, I offer readings of "Earthy Anecdote," "The Snow Man," and "Sunday Morning," which suggest that working against Stevens' investment in a Nietzschean will to creative power was his adamant conviction that the limiting function of earth itself ensured the outcome of the will to imagination could only ever be, at best, "*sufficient*"—never self-surpassing.

Something of Stevens' complex understanding of the relation between the earth and human creative will may be traced in the masterful mid-career poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Early in that work we are told that

The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies  
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
To an immaculate end.

(“It Must Be Abstract,” iii, 1-5)

But then, in the very next canto, we are reminded that

The clouds preceded us.  
There was a muddy centre before we breathed.  
There was a myth before the myth began,  
Venerable and articulate and complete.  
From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

(ibid, iv, 9-15).

It is because of this fundamental sense of alienation—“in spite of blazoned days—that Stevens, no less than Nietzsche, sought a hero for his imagination. Given the earlier inclusiveness of the poem—“The poem refreshes life so that *we* share,” “*we* live in a place / that is not *our* own”—it comes as no surprise that Stevens’ articulation of the necessary abstraction of poetry should end by invoking that figure “the major man,” *not* as a heroic (possibly even Nietzschean) “chieftain, walking by himself, crying / Most miserable, most victorious” (ibid, x, 1), but as a “happy fecundity, flor-abundant force” and “part, / Though an heroic part, of the commonal” (ibid, 6-8).

As Daniel Fuchs observes in his study of the “comic spirit” in Stevens, “[h]uman existence, in all its poverty, is the starting point of [Stevens’] aesthetic. . . . Whatever his stateliness, whatever his gaiety, it all stems from the modern attempt at making a modest

appraisal of human life” (157-58). It is, I think, this essential modesty in Stevens’ poetic which leaves him something rather less than a fully committed Nietzschean. To read Nietzsche is to encounter a gallant commitment to the exorbitant: “Nietzsche is the philosopher of excess” (12), observes Peter Burgard; “Nietzsche’s writing, and his thinking, is *essentially* hyperbolic”(31), writes Alexander Nehamas. Indeed, in his famous essay on Nietzsche’s “ascensional psyche,” Gaston Bachelard estimates the philosopher as “the poet of the summits” (127), one who “works directly *against* the earth” (italics added, 128). As one who once thought to write a poem called “The Alp at the End of the Street,” Stevens’ poetic trajectory was decidedly less “ascensional.”

Leonard and Wharton might well object to Bachelard’s assessment of Nietzsche as one who works “against” the earth, recalling as they do the moment late in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, when one of the “higher men,” the scientific specialist, rebukes the melancholy vaporings of the Wagnerian magician, snatching his harp and interrupting his song and crying, “Air! Let in good air! Let in Zarathustra!” (IV lxxv). Finding an echo of this scene in section xx of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”—“What is there in life except one’s ideas, / Good air, good friend, what is there in life?—, Leonard and Wharton declare that here Stevens “breathes the Zarathustran “good air” of the earth.(118). It is likewise, for Leonard and Wharton, a “Zarathustran” poet who, in “Parochial Theme” (1935), bravely rejoices in the vitality—and fatality—of becoming “fully human in a human world” (119):

This health is holy,

This halloo, halloo, halloo heard over the cries

Of those for whom a square room is a fire,

Of those whom the statues torture and keep down.

This health is holy, this descant of a self,

This barbarous chanting of what is strong, this blare. (12-17).

For Leonard and Wharton, the statues here are “dehumanized doctrinal molds into which humanity tries to fit itself,” the psychological and social strait-jackets which the Nietzschean freed man has thrown off, and the “barbarous chanting of what is strong” expresses the very song of Nietzschean “health” (119).<sup>4</sup> They may be correct. In the echoing “halloos” of the exultant hunters in Stevens’ poem we might well hear Nietzsche’s exhortation in the final poem appended to *The Gay Science*, “A Dancing Song to the Mistral Wind”,

Dance, oh! Dance on all the edges,

Wave-crests, cliffs and mountain ledges,

Ever finding dances new!

Let our knowledge be our gladness,

Let our art be sport and madness,

All that’s joyful shall be true!

Taken together, then, the *halloos* and *healths* of “Parochial Theme” do read as heralds of Nietzschean free-spiritedness. But the deployment of these two words (or cognates thereof) in the ninth couplet of “New England Verses” (1923), quoted above as the first half of my opening epigraph, however, suggests a more ambiguous engagement with Nietzschean invitations to

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<sup>4</sup> For insight into the significance of the concept of “health” in structuring Nietzsche’s thought, see Malcolm Pasley and Mark Letteri.

dance at high elevations.

Admittedly, the first line of the couplet, “Ashen man on ashen cliff above the salt halloo” might seem to foreshadow the statues who “torture and keep down” in “Parochial Theme” and therein to stand itself as a Nietzschean figure for the “dehumanized doctrinal molds into which humanity tries to fit itself,” to recur to Leonard’s and Wharton’s formulation. But that this “ashen admiral” is shown to preside over a “clear sky” described as “the hard, hale [that is, *healthy*] blue. . . .” (ellipsis in original) complicates this reading as clear skies, health, and “hardness,” too, are all heralds of the Nietzschean as Leonard and Wharton so ably demonstrate.

That this “ashen admiral” presiding over a healthy span of clear sky is, in any event, no heroic figure, is confirmed by the tenth couplet of “New England Verse,” cited above as the second part of my opening epigraph. Titled “Statue against a Cloudy Sky,” the couplet describes “[s]caffolds and derricks ris[ing] from the reeds to the clouds / Meditating the will of men in formless crowds.” Contrary to its title, then, no formal “statue” *is* erected here: only the makeshift, multiple and transient shapes of ongoing labour. Whereas the admiral seems severed from the prospect below and before him, the scaffolds and derricks are intimately part of the reeds and men, growing out of them. That strange verb, *meditating*, which can mean both “to ponder” and to actively “conceive or design mentally” (*OED*) is crucial here as it affirms that even as the scaffolds rise up, they maintain a complex and vital relation to their terrestrial, and notably humble, origin: “the will of men in formless crowds.” Here then, “the will of men” on earth occurs on a decidedly horizontal plain, nothing heroic, nothing surpassing, indeed, merely *sufficient*. And therefore, Stevens implies, the very stuff of poetry.

Like Leonard and Wharton, and Bates as well, I too read Stevens’ poems as suggesting

that their author read Nietzsche early, late, and deep. Along the way, however, I have borne in mind (perhaps too suspiciously) the passage in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” (first given as a lecture at Mount Holyoke in 1943) where Stevens speaks of “a cloud of double characters, against whose thought and speech it is imperative [one] should remain on constant guard. These are the poetic philosophers and the philosophical poets” (*CPP* 677). Believing Stevens to have approached Nietzsche as just such a “double character,” I herein trace the poet and the philosopher in agonistic, rather than purely affirmative, relation.



Chapter One: “Merely the effect of the epatant”’—The Question of Stevens and Nietzsche.

Nietzsche walked in the Alps in the caresses of reality. We ourselves crawl  
out of our offices and classrooms and become alert at the opera.

(Wallace Stevens, “Imagination as Value,” 1948.)

On June 27, 1945, Wallace Stevens stood before the Phi Beta Kappa graduating class at Harvard and read a new poem, written especially for the occasion, titled “Description Without Place.” Sharing the stage with him was Sumner Welles, former Undersecretary of State to President Roosevelt, who had moments earlier delivered as the commencement oration a speech titled “The Vision of a World at Peace,” which projected the United States as the benevolent post-war superpower that would ensure peace and prosperity for all by “offer[ing] its moral leadership to the world” (494). Many in the audience doubtless knew something of Welles from the newspapers, or perhaps were aware of his recent book *The Time for Decision* (1944). As a regular reader of the *New York Times*, Wallace Stevens himself would certainly have had some prior knowledge of the statesman’s determined advocacy of a new internationalism in which the United States would take a leading role.<sup>1</sup> That Welles, or any of Stevens’ other listeners, knew the poet’s work intimately seems unlikely: a survey of reviews to this point in his poetic career

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<sup>1</sup> Although Welles made only passing reference to the Soviet Union in his convocation address, this brief comment spoke to his conviction, laid out earlier in *The Time for Decision*, that the United States and the Soviet Union should set aside their “fanatical suspicions” of each other and recognize their shared interest in working together to ensure a peaceable world (306). Less than a year later this position would have lost all support within the American administration which was by then on full offensive against the Soviets. See further Leffler.

by and large affirms an extraordinary talent being read by very few.<sup>2</sup>

“Description Without Place,” which Harold Bloom once declared to be “nobody’s particular favourite” and destined to remain so “since it is apparently Stevens at his most arid” (239), is unlikely to have broadened the poet’s reputation much on the occasion of its first reading.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, while it is impossible to reconstruct the scene precisely, it is reasonable to surmise that for every appreciative murmur which greeted the poem’s final injunction that the future “be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be / Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening,” there were many more *sotto voce* rumblings of bewilderment. Furthermore, whereas Welles’ energetic description of America’s future supremacy abided by the protocols of the convocation genre in bountifully affirming a sense of place and purpose for the young graduates, Stevens’ elliptical heralding of the future as “description *without* place, / The categorical predicate, the arc” (emphasis added) might have seemed conducive only to moral vertigo.<sup>4</sup> Yet

---

<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, an anonymous reviewer of *Parts of a World* (1942) for the *New Republic* observed that “Wallace Stevens has been, and still is, very much . . . a ‘coterie writer.’ His audience is probably more restricted than that of any other poet of his importance” (cited in Doyle, 387).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Riddel similarly criticizes the poem for its “dangerous aridity” in *The Clairvoyant Eye* (198-99). Helen Vendler once tartly dismissed sections of the poem as approaching the “unspotted imbecile revery” of the apotheosized poetic imagination envisioned in canto XIII of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (*On Extended Wings*, 219).

<sup>4</sup> Here I assume Stevens to use “without” according to its common-place usage, that is, in the sense of *absent of* or *lacking*. Such an assumption is fundamental to Nietzschean readings of “Description Without Place,” as it authorizes from the outset such claims as that made by Michael T. Beehler, in one of the earliest of such readings: “Since it is always ‘without place,’ description is not a revelation of anything beyond itself. It is only an internally-reflective system of vacant names, an ‘artificial thing’ with no referent beyond the structure of its own seemings”(257). But, in fact, the primary meaning of “without,” albeit now archaic, is *outside of* or *beyond*—a meaning which arguably *affirms* referentiality. I defer exploration of this double-valency of “without” until my final chapter.

for Stevens, the poem was a major articulation of a subject no less crucial than Welles' assessment of global politics. As he wrote to Leonard van Geyzel on May 16<sup>th</sup>, only a month before his reading at Harvard and so while in the throes of writing "Description Without Place,"

For a long time, I have felt the most intense interest in defining the place of poetry. It would be current cant to say the place of poetry in society, but I mean the place of poetry in thought and its place in society only in consequence of its place in thought, and certainly I don't mean strict thought, but the special thinking of poetry, or, rather, the special manner of thinking in poetry or expressing thought in poetry. (*L* 500-1)

Elusive and ungiving as the poem may have appeared, it addressed questions that were central to Stevens' sense of poetic mission.

That Nietzsche (and Lenin, immediately following) should figure so prominently in Stevens' reflections on "the place of poetry in thought" may well have further discountenanced the poet's audience that day. Stevens introduced Nietzsche and Lenin as part of a curious group of five—"Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne / Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon, // To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake" (III, 26-28), and no doubt some of the poet's audience that day would have preferred to hear about the "seemings" of the first three persons. As it happened, however, the poet did not elaborate at all how things "seemed" to the French Protestant theologian, the eighteenth-century English queen, or Stevens' fellow poet—born in Chile but here recalled for the reader in his early consular position in Columbo. Here, in full, is the extraordinary diptych Stevens sketched for his audience on that summer day in 1945:

Nietzsche in Basel studied the deep pool  
Of these discolorations, mastering

The moving and the moving of their forms  
In the much-mottled motion of blank time.

His reverie was the deepness of the pool,  
The very pool, his thoughts the colored forms,

The eccentric souvenirs of human shapes,  
Wrapped in their seemings, crowd on curious crowd,

In a kind of total affluence, all first,  
All final, colors subjected in reverie

To an innate grandiose, an innate light,  
The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool,

Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias  
In perpetual revolution, round and round . . .

Lenin on a bench beside a lake disturbed  
The swans. He was not the man for swans.

The slouch of his body and his look were not  
In the suavest keeping. The shoes, the clothes, the hat

Suited the decadence of those silences  
In which he sat. All chariots were drowned. The swans

Moved on the buried water where they lay.  
Lenin took bread from his pocket, scattered it—

The swans fled outward to remoter reaches,  
As if they knew of distant beaches; and were

Dissolved. The distances of space and time  
Were one and swans far off were swans to come.

The eye of Lenin kept the far-off shapes.  
His mind raised up, down-drowned, the chariots.

And reaches, beaches, tomorrow's regions became

One thinking of apocalyptic legions.

It bears emphasizing that neither Lenin nor Nietzsche would have seemed ideal characters to conjure with in America in 1945, and particularly not in such a public forum. As Welles himself had recently observed in *The Time for Decision*, a long-standing and deep-rooted antipathy to Communism had flourished in the United States throughout the years of the war, and was growing ever stronger as the war in Europe ended and policy makers, and the public at large, nervously observed the shifting balances of power.<sup>5</sup> Although Stevens' sketch of a down-at-heel Lenin hardly made the poet vulnerable to the charge of being "un-American," his very decision to foreground the Bolshevik leader may have struck his audience as mildly subversive.<sup>6</sup>

More immediately startling, however, must have been Stevens' portrait of Nietzsche in reverie, endlessly plumbing the pool of "discoloured" human semblances, and subjecting everything to "an innate grandiose, an innate light." Perhaps Stevens believed that his Phi Beta Kappa listeners, conscious of their society's founding motto, *Philosophia Biou Kybernetes* ("Philosophy the guide of life"), would receive his Nietzsche first and foremost as an important, albeit radical, figure in the history of ideas rather than as the (appropriated) *Vaterfigur* of National Socialism. But he must have realized that some of his listeners would find his sketch of the philosopher both objectionably subtle and too golden by half: "the sun of Nietzsche gilding

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<sup>5</sup> For further insight into anti-Communism in America, see Joel Kovel's *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anti-Communism and the Making of America* and Melvyn Leffler's *The Specter of Communism: The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953*.

<sup>6</sup> For insight into Stevens' rhetoric relation to the Cold War, see Bauer.

the pool,” indeed!<sup>7</sup> As Manfred Pütz observes, during the Second World War, as during the First, “almost any non-political literary or philosophical approach to [Nietzsche or] his works was branded as an intellectual aberration severely frowned upon by the American public at large” (7). While Germany had surrendered six weeks before, the defeat of the Nazis had hardly allowed an immediate recuperation of Nietzsche’s virtually criminalized reputation.<sup>8</sup> Although not one to be troubled by the opinion of the public “at large,” Stevens was a courteous man, and it is surely remarkable that he should have invoked two such charged figures as Nietzsche and Lenin on that convocation day, and with such seeming insouciance about their contemporary political resonance.<sup>9</sup>

Though the poet himself seems to have believed that “Description Without Place” might raise some eyebrows, judging from a comment he made to Allen Tate six weeks before about going to Harvard to read the poem “if I have vitamins enough in my system to go there with it” (L 497), that Stevens’ invocation of Nietzsche and Lenin on that summer day in 1945 *was* extraordinary is by no means a critical commonplace. Subsequent readers have taken what is self-

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<sup>7</sup> In pages following, I pursue in some detail the open question of what Stevens actually meant by “gildering.”

<sup>8</sup> Some in Stevens’ audience that day would have been familiar with Harvard historian Crane Brinton’s scurrilous and simple minded attack on the philosopher in his popular monograph *Nietzsche* (1941). Nietzsche did have his few defenders within the American academy. See, for example, George Morgan’s *What Nietzsche Means* (1941), which a contemporary reviewer praised in specific comparison to Brinton’s study as “a most carefully reasoned statement, not of the psychological or historical roots and consequences of Nietzsche’s thought, but of its expressed and implied meaning” (Foxe, 119). Morgan’s study was not well-known, however. It would be another five years before Walter Kaufmann’s powerfully redemptive *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* appeared. For more information on the reception of Nietzsche in America see Hays Steilberg.

<sup>9</sup> On Stevens’ courtesy see Cleanth Brooks in Peter Brazeau, 174.

evidently the most charged passage in the poem, namely the Nietzsche-Lenin canto (hereafter Canto IV), in stride. While I cannot claim that my survey of the criticism of “Description Without Place” has been exhaustive, I have encountered only one reader, Mark Schoening, who addresses the contemporary resonance of Canto IV—or at least that of its second half.<sup>10</sup> Schoening situates the poem precisely in the moment of a burgeoning Cold War rhetoric of “sacrifice and sociability,” of demands that “rational” and “logical” choices be made with inevitable attendant sacrifices for the good of the community, and argues that the poem reveals how Stevens objected to this rhetoric, believing such a doctrine of “rational” sacrifice to lead only to an invariably “tragic” union, and that he meant his poem to offer a “profounder logic” of “multiplicity rather than singularity” (145).<sup>11</sup> According to Schoening, Stevens saw Welles himself as a contemporary proponent of the “revolutionary [resolving] logic of American liberalism,” and Lenin as a figure for the same kind of inexorable rationalism underlying Communism. Against this odd coupling of proponents of the rational, Schoening positions Nietzsche as a figure of “suspension and speculation” (140), a figure of courageous irrationality that encourages “multiplicity and inconsistency to become ‘the world’ rather than its undoing” (145).<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, however, while Schoening identifies Lenin as a figure for “the Soviet system

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<sup>10</sup> While Alan Filreis and James Longenbach engage specifically with the contemporary socio-political context of “Description Without Place,” neither critic addresses the resonance that Nietzsche and Lenin likely had for Stevens’ Harvard audience. Furthermore, both take Nietzsche as a figure for an intellectual / aesthetic position, without reference to the man himself.

<sup>11</sup> Welles’ decision to title his 1944 study of the new world order to come *The Time for Decision* might be seen as one instance of this appeal to “logical” choices, however difficult.

<sup>12</sup> Schoening positions Welles as the evident quintessence of rationalism, and, therefore, as Stevens’ putative target, but of course Welles himself does not appear in Stevens’ poem. Thus, Lenin the Communist must bear the weight of Schoening’s claim for the “revolutionary logic” that American Liberalism and Communism share.

with which [he] had become associated” (147), and refers specifically to Edmund Wilson’s *To the Finland Station* (1940) to elucidate his meaning, he interprets the nature of “Nietzsche in Basel” on the basis of “Description Without Place” alone. For Schoening, the poem presents Stevens’ philosopher as an emancipating intelligence, seemingly outside time, which, unlike the evidently monocular mind of the doctrinaire Lenin, can “embrace, rather than resist, variation and fluidity” and which has “exchanged the project of establishing being for the project of sustaining ‘the moving and the moving’ of ‘forms’” (147).

Published in 2000, Schoening’s thoughtful argument articulates a long-standing and significant critical consensus on Stevens’ “Nietzsche in Basel.” Repeatedly, the Nietzsche in “Description Without Place” has been read as figuring Stevens’ unequivocal celebration of multiplicity over singularity, difference over identity, becoming over being.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for example, Bloom finds “Nietzsche in Basel” to be the prime exemplar of “a jubilant celebration of the vagaries of individual seeing” (242). Similarly, Joseph Riddel in his essay “‘Neo-Nietzschean Clatter’—Speculation and the Modernist Image” (1981) offers Stevens’ sketch of Nietzsche in reverie as a tribute to what the philosopher himself described in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” as “the drive towards metaphor . . . [that] continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world which presents itself to waking man, so that it will be as colorful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence, charming, and eternally new as the world of dreams” (88-89). And so David Jarraway understands the Nietzsche of “Description Without Place” to be

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<sup>13</sup> Whether one judges this figuration to be a marker of emancipating or escapist impulses in Stevens has depended upon the ideological perspective of the reader. So also, of course, do Vendler’s and the early Riddel’s figuring of both Nietzsche and Lenin as nothing more than dissociated states of mind.



a “man of possibility” (204)—here a short hand for Jarroway’s finely argued sense of Nietzsche as a critically sustaining force in Stevens’ brave commitment to “the question of belief,” even in the absence of its satisfactions.<sup>14</sup> To speak broadly, then, Stevens’ “Nietzsche in Basel” has been read as corresponding to “the Nietzsche” of Gilles Deleuze, whose ground-breaking *Nietzsche and Philosophy* critically celebrates the philosopher’s affirmation of “laughter, play, and dance” as paths to our acceptance of “becoming” (193- 4, 182-183). Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, too, have most persuasively presented Nietzsche as the quintessential philosopher of deconstructive “play.” So the fluidity and light in Stevens’ portrait of “Nietzsche in Basel” has become for many literary critics a bright foreshadowing of the philosopher as interpreted by post-structuralism.

That Stevens’ philosopher in “gildering” reverie has been thus understood is not surprising given that “Description Without Place” seems precisely to meditate on something very like Nietzsche’s core doctrine of perspectivism, that doctrine which, in Arthur Danto’s elegant phrasing, holds that “we score the blank surface of reality with the longitudes and parallels of concepts, but the concepts and ideas are ours, and they have not the slightest basis in fact” (67), and which is, of course, a doctrine central to post-structuralist thought. One might be hard-pressed to find a better illustration of Nietzsche’s contention that “all life rests on semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects, the necessity of perspectivism and error” (*Birth of Tragedy*, “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” 5), than “Description Without Place.” The poem presents in turn the

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<sup>14</sup>Although in a decidedly non-celebratory key, James Longenbach and Alan Filreis likewise emphasize Nietzsche as a proponent of “multiplicity over singularity.” For these critics, however, such a philosophical position leading to such postulates as “all the world is fiction” fosters political quiescence.

semblances of a “green queen [who] / In the seeming of the summer of her sun / By her own seeming made the summer change” (I); of our own poetic reconfiguring of the ancient planet Venus as a “wizened starlight growing young, / In which old stars are planets of morning, fresh / In the brilliantest descriptions of new day” (V); and then of an enigmatic “hard hidalgo,” through whom Stevens projects “a style of life, / The invention of a nation in a phrase” (VII). And so in his powerful study of the “Nietzschean intertext” in Stevens’ early poetry, to which I turn repeatedly in the course of my own pursuit of the question of Stevens and Nietzsche, B. J. Leggett reads “Description Without Place” as “an explicitly Nietzschean text” (180) whose portrait of Nietzsche in its fourth canto serves to affirm the poem’s Nietzschean premise that “for any being appearance is identical to reality in every respect—that to appear *is* to be” (180, italics in original).

Indeed, for Leggett, the “innate light” of Nietzsche’s thought “gildering the pool” of human experience in Canto IV positively foreshadows the final, and for him, patently perspectivist, lines of “Description Without Place” which insist that “what we say of the future must portend, / Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be / Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening” (VII). Drawing on Vendler’s comment in *On Extended Wings* about the equivocal status of “redden” as both a transitive and intransitive verb, Leggett finds the poem’s final trope of rubies reddened (and reddening) to affirm that while “an imaginative interpretation of the world like that of Nietzsche is entirely self-contained, grammatically intransitive if we seek to describe it, [it is] at the same time in some sense that is left unexplained, transitive—its

deepening color shading interpretations of a like nature that it touches” (182).<sup>15</sup> That is, for Leggett, “Description Without Place” “go[es] beyond Nietzsche’s argument [for perspectivism] . . . (that it is *we* who create the beauty and sublimity of our own worlds) to argue that the imaginative thinker also creates the worlds of his fellow creatures” (184, italics in original). And so Leggett reads the “innate light” of Nietzsche’s revery “that colors . . . everything around it” as “a variation on the figure of the reddening rubies” (182). Leggett is thus able to contain the puzzle of Stevens’ use of the word “innate”—twice repeated in the poem to describe “the sun of Nietzsche”—a word whose expressive faith in the idea of the inborn, the essential, might be read as the ironic antithesis of the philosopher’s own conviction that “all life rests on semblance, art. . . prismatic effects.”

Appropriate to his reading of “Nietzsche in Basel” as an elegantly self-aware perspectivist tableau within the exemplarily perspectivist “Description Without Place,” Leggett finds no distinction or gap between Nietzsche’s revery and the world: “[T]he poem’s premise [is] that Nietzsche’s seemings are inseparable from what we call the real” (182). Citing the last half of line 10, followed by lines 11 through 14 in Stevens’ fourteen-line portrait of the philosopher, Leggett asserts that “[Nietzsche’s] thoughts are

colors subjected in revery

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<sup>15</sup> Here Leggett is picking up on Vendler’s sense that it is “the latent transitiveness of ‘reddden’ [that] allows Stevens his luminous colorings” (228). But whereas Leggett emphasizes the spatial effects of such luminosity in order to advance his perspectivist reading of “Description Without Place,” Vendler reads the resonant glow of “reddden” in temporal terms as a figure of “*prophetic beauty*”(229, italics mine). For Vendler, “‘reddden’ is one of those verbs of progressive action which Stevens finds immensely useful in his desire to guarantee the future. Like other verbs which lean into the time to come (his favorites are ‘become’ and ‘change’ and ‘transform’), verbs of progressive change, such as ‘darken’ or ‘deepen’ or ‘spread,’ draw us into the future with them” (228).

To an innate grandiose, an innate light,  
The sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool,  
Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias  
In perpetual revolution, round and round. . . (182-83).

Seeming to lend support to Leggett's explicit identification of the philosopher's thoughts with the ostensible subject of his "gildering" meditation are lines 5-6 which speak of Nietzsche's reverie as "the deepness of the pool, / The very pool, his thoughts the colored forms." Here, the absence of punctuation between "his thoughts" and "the colored forms" might seem to assert identity between Nietzsche's semblances and what the poem earlier describes as "the greater seeming of the major mind" (II, 6). Carrying forward the seemingly clear appositive logic of "his thoughts the colored forms," one might well read the solar reverie of Nietzsche in Basel as a meditation which renders the philosopher's already brilliant world of "thoughts"/ "colors" ever more dazzling, and therefore positively pre-figures the self-reddening rubies of the last canto.

But in fact Stevens' portrait of Nietzsche in Basel *does* mark a gap between the philosopher's seemings and that which lies outside them. That is, whereas the rubies which glow so enigmatically at the end of "Description Without Place" appear there *ex nihilo*, the "colors" which are "subjected" to Nietzsche's "gildering" reverie in the final third of Canto IV are first introduced as "these discolorations . . . // . . . moving and moving . . . / In the much-mottled motion of blank time" (2-4). That this moving motley is separate from and prior to the philosopher is surely confirmed by the descriptor "these," which throws the reader back to the wider field of "integrations of the past" which are identified towards the end of the third canto, in line 28, as composing a "*Museo Olimpico*" (italics in original, 29) of semblances which apparently have turned dull and pale with age. Drawing on the primary meaning of *discoloured*

as “deprived of colour, pale. . . [or] changed to a duller, dingier, or unnatural colour” (*OED*), and then marking the shift to the phrase “colored forms” in the wake of Nietzsche’s “mastering” of the “integrations of the past,” one might assume the poem to mean that Nietzsche had thus restored to “these discolorations” something of their former depth and richness of palette—prior to “gildering” them in his reverie. In this sense, then, we might well affirm that “Nietzsche’s thoughts *are* ‘the colored forms,’” taking Leggett’s judgement that “[Nietzsche’s] thoughts are ‘colors subjected in reverie’” a critical step further. I say “critical” because if Stevens’ Nietzsche can be understood as having added, or returned, color to a world made drab by time and habit, then the further “subjection” of this fresh palette—in an important sense become Nietzsche’s own—to the “innate light” of his thought may no more trouble us than does the poem’s final trope of “rubies [being] reddened by rubies reddening.” To recur again to Leggett’s assessment, we might here find no more and no less than the scene of “the deepening color” of Nietzsche’s “imaginative interpretation of the world. . . shading interpretations of a like nature that it touches” (182).

But there is another valency to *discoloured*, namely “variously coloured; of different colours; variegated, parti-coloured” (*OED*). With recourse to this meaning, it becomes possible to read the term “discolorations” in a positive light as a figure for semblances rich with and diverse in color, a meaning which can then be carried through to the later “colored forms,” and even into their further articulation as “[t]he eccentric souvenirs of human shapes, / Wrapped in their seemings, crowd on curious crowd” (7-8). In briefly sketching forth a world of “discolorations” / “colored forms,” presumably all shades across the spectrum, “moving / In the much-mottled motion of blank time,” the first lines of Canto IV may thus recall together the

“green queen” of Canto I, “the red, the blue, the argent queen[s]” of Canto II, and the “purple-leaping element” of Canto III. If so, then it is this kaleidoscopic plenitude of colour that Nietzsche’s revery “masters,” a parti-coloured mass going every which way, and nowhere in particular, until the philosopher sets it in a “gilded” spin. Such a reading thus confirms the “colored forms” as matter prior to and independent of Nietzsche’s thinking, and within such a reading, Stevens’ depiction of the philosopher “mastering” motley, and “subject[ing]” eccentricity to an “innate grandiose” becomes much more troubling. Depending on how one understands “discolorations,” then, Stevens’ “Nietzsche in Basel” may be understood as a redemptive figure, recalling the philosopher’s own Zarathustra who would have us “be[come] the meaning of the earth” (Z, Prologue 3) and then gild all with gayest laughter, or as one whose “strong mind distorts the world,” to recall the poet’s judgement to his friend and Nietzsche aficionado Henry Church in a letter written several years before “Description Without Place.”<sup>16</sup>

Interpreting “discolorations” as a synonym for rich motley is central to my own reading of Steven’s “Nietzsche in Basel” as revealing the poet’s considerable ambivalence towards the philosopher. But there are other aspects of the poem which might also be read as casting a long shadow over the idea that “the sun of Nietzsche” is in “Description Without Place” a benevolent power. It is worth noting, for example, how the very syntax of Canto IV itself seems to draw

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<sup>16</sup> Church first contacted Stevens early in 1939 in his capacity as editor of the French little magazine *Mesures*, seeking permission to translate several poems from *Harmonium* for a special American issue. Their friendship was established first in correspondence and deepened when Church and his wife took up residence in New York in late 1939, having fled France at the outbreak of the war. As Leggett notes in his helpful summary, Church initiated a “remarkable dialogue on Nietzsche” with Stevens in 1942, which continued intermittently on the subject until Church’s death in 1947.

readers down into “the deepness of the pool, the very pool” of Nietzsche’s reverie.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, we begin pleasantly enough, wading into the gentle cascade of the first sentence of the canto: two couplets seeming to survey the pool of Nietzsche’s study, and “master[y],” of the discolored “integrations of the past.” But, then, the canto’s second sentence plunges into the pool itself, taking the reader down with it. Five couplets long, this sentence is a tour de force of embedded subordination and oblique reference which seems to end at the bottom of the pool with the reader brought up short by the colon in Line 13: “Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution round and round. . .” Of course, the line can be read more positively. Does Nietzsche’s sun not recall the reader to light and air? Vendler, certainly, reads a return to the surface, or at least to “a reminder of the solar presence, the conferring mind of the visionary, ‘the sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool’” (222). Deferring for another moment the critical question of just what “gildering” means in this poem, I would suggest that at whatever depth we are left in the pool of Nietzsche’s thought, we are left *suspended*, as Stevens’ critical ellipsis suggests.<sup>18</sup>

In thus reading Canto IV as mapping a discomfiting descent into a mind presented ultimately as a whirlpool, I depart significantly from Leggett’s approach to the poem which involves breaking the cascading second sentence of Canto IV in half. For Leggett, Stevens’ sketch of Nietzsche in “Description Without Place” celebrates the philosopher as one who has

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<sup>17</sup> In her reading of the canto, Vendler observes that “the imitative action here, as Nietzsche creates a new coloration of the world, is a deeper and deeper sinking-in toward the object of vision as it become the visionary object” (222).

<sup>18</sup> Here I draw on Bart Eeckhout’s engaging discussion of the ellipsis in “When Language Stops. . . Suspension Points in the Poetry of Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens.”

“himself colored the way the world seems / is to us” (181), and so he reads the first nine and a half lines of Canto IV as serving simply “to illustrate how what once *seemed* to one mind now *is*, . . . giv[ing] us a picture of Nietzsche in the process of formulating his revolutionary thought” (181, italics in original). According to Leggett, the comma following the words “All final” in the tenth line marks the canto’s critical shift from figuring Nietzsche’s semblances as a self-contained idiolect to presenting them radiating outward, the bright *lingua franca* of “reality.” What Nietzsche thought has become what “is.” For Leggett, the final image of philosopher’s revery, “gildering the swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution, round and round . . .,” “implies through its figuration that Nietzsche, like any strong thinker, was the creative force, the reality (the sun) that colored his world, and by the end of the poem we have learned that the light of such strong imaginations gilders other worlds as well” (183).

Thus explicating Stevens’ portrait of Nietzsche as a scene of radiant expansiveness, of the sunny effulgence of spirit which Zarathustra calls “the bestowing virtue” (I, xxii), might seem at first to produce a text free of ambivalent undercurrents. For Leggett, that Stevens’ “Nietzsche in Basel” presents just such a scene of “bestowing” is confirmed by the word “gildering,” which appears twice in the canto and is tacitly assumed both times by Leggett to be a variant of *gilding*, in the sense of “cover[ing] or tinge[ing] with golden light (said esp. of the sun)” (*OED*). In thus equating “gildering” with *gilding* in Stevens’ Nietzsche portrait, Leggett would seem to have considerable justification. Certainly, readers of Nietzsche who encounter Stevens’ “Nietzsche in Basel” might well recall the luminous passage in *The Gay Science* which speaks of a new happiness for humanity: “a happiness which, like the sun in the evening, continually gives of its



inexhaustible riches and empties into the sea,—and like the sun, too, feels itself richest when even the poorest fisherman rows with golden oars!” (#337).<sup>19</sup> And so, as we have seen, Leggett confidently repeats the word *gilder* himself in his summation of “Description Without Place” as a poem which shows “the light of . . . strong imaginations gilder[ing] other worlds,” inexhaustibly bright. Concluding his reading of the poem, Leggett suggests that its Nietzsche portrait also “incorporates as intertext. . . the central conceit of a commentary” given by Anthony Ludovici, in his *Nietzsche and Art* (1911), on a passage in *The Will to Power* where Nietzsche rejoices in “[m]an as a poet, as a thinker, as a god, as love, as power” (qtd Leggett 183). Leggett then goes on to quote the following from Ludovici’s text:

This man, following his divine inspiration to subdue the earth and to make it his, became the greatest stimulus to Life itself, the greatest bond between earth and the human soul; and, in shedding the glamour of his personality, like the sun, upon the things he interpreted and valued, he also gilded, by reflection, his fellow creatures. (qtd Leggett 184)

According to Leggett, Stevens’ text presents directly what is implicit in Ludovici’s commentary, namely that Nietzsche was himself the great solar *gilder*, whose “glamour,” to recur to the earlier critic’s commentary, was a wholly positive enchantment. But where Ludovici uses the word “gilded” to describe the radiant effect of the Nietzschean spirit, Leggett employs “gilded” to identify Stevens’ Nietzsche himself as a radiant force, importing the term from “Description

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<sup>19</sup> See also *Z*, III, lvi, 3.

Without Place,” as if *gilded* and *gildered* were synonyms and could thereby be drawn together as an intertextual bridge point between the unabashed delight in Nietzsche so apparent in Ludovici’s study and the decidedly more enigmatic sketch of the philosopher offered in Stevens’ poem.

But as Alison Rieke reminds us in her very recent analysis of the “recalcitrant poetic sounds” (47) of “Description Without Place,” *gild* and *gilder* are *not* synonyms, the latter, in fact, being an obsolete transitive verb meaning “To catch in a snare” (*OED*).<sup>20</sup> Of course, Stevens may have chosen to write *gild* as “gilder,” deciding on the bi-syllable form simply to maintain the dominant ten-beat line of “Description Without Place.”<sup>21</sup> But then again, we may be witnessing Stevens at serious semantic play as he moves, sleight-of-hand, between the actual meaning of *gildering* and its deceptive semblance to *gilding*. As Eleanor Cook once said, “Stevens is so riddling a poet that it is possible to speak of much of his work as ‘riddle’ and go on to solve what we can” (15). Such riddling play *is* evidently at work in “Description Without Place”: Rieke shows how Stevens’ diction plays upon secondary, outdated, or rare usages of words elsewhere in the poem, and it seems thus quite likely that the poet was aware of the actual meaning of “gilder” even as he sought to make play upon its semblance to *gild*.<sup>22</sup> In speaking of the “sun of

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<sup>20</sup> While Cook notes the obsolete meaning of “gilder” in her *Readers’ Guide*, she offers no further commentary.

<sup>21</sup> This ten-beat metrical structure is not invariable, however. The second line in the canto’s Lenin portrait, for example, takes nine beats: “The swans. He was not the man for swans.” A number of other lines in the poem are eleven and even twelve beats long.

<sup>22</sup> Stevens’ passion for getting the “right” word is well-known. One of the clerks at *Hartford Accident and Indemnity*, Charle O’Dowd, recalls, “Sometimes I’d run across a word [in Stevens’ correspondence] that struck me [as] out of place; . . . And I would do exactly what he

Nietzsche gildering the pool,” Stevens might indeed at first appear to be celebrating the generous radiance of the philosopher’s meditations. To insist on the “actual” meaning of *gilder* here might seem counter-intuitive pedantry: a sparkle, not a snare, is the natural outcome of the sun upon the surface of water. But the poet’s second use of “gilder,” in the image that concludes his sketch of Nietzsche, is more ambiguous: “Yes: gildering the swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution round and round. . .” If we understand the “swarm-like manias” as *already* revolving, it is possible to read Nietzsche as the great gilder whose reverie is redemptive, giving meaning, force, and beauty to human existence that would otherwise be a wheel grinding on drearily, pointlessly. But it is also possible to read Nietzsche as a *gilderer*, as one who “gather[s] the world into a snare” (Rieke, 54) and thus participates in generating these revolutions.

Whether we read “gildering” as *gilding* or *ensnaring* will depend, once again, on definitive judgements we make about Stevens’ far from definitive phrasing. Indeed, no part of the final couplet in Stevens’ sketch of Nietzsche in Basel can be read categorically, not even that seemingly categorical “Yes” that opens line eleven. Positioned as if to affirm “the sun of Nietzsche gildering the pool,” this “Yes” might be read as a nod to the philosopher’s central faith in the need for “a holy Yea unto life” (*TSZ* I, i). If this is the case, however, a reader might wonder at the colon appended to it. Where a comma might have served, Stevens deploys a strong pause, thus seeming to arrest the potent radiance of this affirmation in the very moment of its expression: “Yes:” Similarly troubling is the phrase “swarm-like manias.” If Stevens did, indeed,

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used to do all the time: go out into the law library and get Webster’s big dictionary, look [up] the word, and sure enough, it was right on the spot. It was a word that was unusual, and it would make one think, He’s missed it here—but you found it eventually. Maybe it was the tenth or twelfth meaning, but it would be exactly the word that fitted what he was trying to get across” (cited in Brazeau, 40).

“intend” to valorize his “Nietzsche in Basel,” the phrase “swarm-like manias” seems an unfortunate choice, recalling as it does the philosopher’s own tragic lapse into insanity. But it is the alleged solipsism in Nietzsche’s thought, rather than his personal history, that might constitute the more serious concern. Is the final couplet in Stevens’ portrait of Nietzsche meant as a consummate image of solipsism? Such a reading might then see Nietzsche’s “gildering of “manias / In perpetual revolution” as an ironic inversion of the “green queen” of Canto I. As Cook suggests, this first of several queens in “Description Without Place” may be read as a figure of spring, an interpretation which allows possible insight into the poem’s riddling observation that “In the seeming of the summer of her sun / [She] [b]y her own seeming made the summer change.”<sup>23</sup> That is, the sun of spring only *seems* the sun of summer, being as yet too cold and brief, but it is, even so, this spring sun that draws forth summer. As Stevens put it in “Holiday in Reality,” published in the summer of 1944, “Spring is umbilical or else it is not spring.” If this queen is, indeed, a Primavera figure who, each year in a cycle without end, *greens* the motley earth in her own innately verdant light, then Nietzsche’s “gildering” reverie could be read in happy parallel. But one might have to work a bit for this outcome. Whereas the coming round again of “spring’s bright paradise,” to recur to Stevens’ phrasing in the late poem “Farewell Without a Guitar” (1954), is surely an easy thing to rejoice in, the vision of “swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution, round and round . . .” which concludes his portrait of Nietzsche might provoke a more ambivalent response.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See her *Reader’s Guide*, 194.

<sup>24</sup> Early in his study of the Nietzschean intertext in Stevens, Leggett in fact identifies ambivalence in Stevens’ portrait of the philosopher “in Basel,” noting especially the phrase “swarm-like manias / In perpetual revolution” as a “negative term” (48).

Certainly, it is not easy to cast “the swarm-like manias” in a positive light. “Manias” is particularly difficult to salvage, although a striking word in context as in the singular it bespeaks a state of mind in which what *seems* to be is not.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Stevens meant to suggest, tongue-in-cheek, that all our semblances are “manias.” This said, “manias” is not, in itself, a valorized term in Stevens, appearing elsewhere in his poetry only once, and negatively, in “Like Decorations” (1935), to speak of “a man gone mad, after all, for time, in spite / Of the cuckoos, a man with a mania for clocks” (xlvi, 2-3). “Swarm-like,” on the other hand, might recall a number of variant usages of both the verb and the noun *swarm* elsewhere in Stevens: enigmatically, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937), which at one point figures the imagination as “the swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams / Of inaccessible Utopia” (xxvi, 10-11); disturbingly, in “Dutch Graves in Bucks County” (1943), when “Angry men and furious machines / Swarm from the little blue of the horizon / To the great blue of the middle height” (1-2); and luminously, in the final canto of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949), where we find

The swarming activity of the formulae

Of statement, directly and indirectly get at,

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,

A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,

A woman writing a note and tearing it up. (xxxix, 11-15)

Although not in themselves invariably positive words for Stevens, “swarm” and its variants are themselves derivatives of motion, which as Bloom notes, *was* “an honorific term” (349) for the

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<sup>25</sup> Note the original meaning of euphoria as the feeling of well-being in a person who is in fact, very sick.

poet. As in the above quotation from “An Ordinary Evening,” “swarms” or “swarming” in Stevens may even sometimes become explicitly identified with the meanings that poetry makes out of the otherwise barren rock of human existence, “meanings . . . / Of such *mixed motion* and such imagery / That its barrenness becomes a thousand things // And so exists no more “ (“The Rock,” ii, 28-31, italics added). One might also consider the “swarming chitter // Of crows that flap away beyond the creaking / Of wooden wagons” in the early uncollected poem, “For An Old Woman in a Wig” (1915-16), or the “glass aswarm with things going as far as they can” in “Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly” (1952).

What, then, are we to make of “swarm-like”? Might Stevens just as well have used *swarming* for his intended sense, choosing the “-like” construction only to avoid the double jingle of two participles that “gildering in swarming manias” would produce? Or perhaps he meant “swarm-like” to recall in itself his poem’s larger thesis about being and *like-ness*—that is, seeming. But there is at least a third possibility. Not only is “swarm” often a term with strongly positive associations for Stevens, a term that evokes the energy of the natural world, but the word might be heard as an echo of “the buzzing world” named in the final canto of “Description Without Place,” a world of “being” and of “seeming[s] to be,” and, of course, of the “actual” bee itself. Indeed, it is worth recalling the literal connection between swarms and bees, especially the fact that bees swarm with one object in mind: to seek out and establish a new colony with a young queen.<sup>26</sup> Bee swarms are thus the very sign of ongoing life and renewal. It may thus be possible to infer a draining or deferral of vital force in the phrase “swarm-like manias,” particularly as these are found “[i]n *perpetual* revolution, round and round. . .”(italics added),

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<sup>26</sup> For confirmation of this fact, I thank my dad, a long-time keeper of bees.

never coming to a place of rest and, therein, regeneration.

The range of possible connotations of the phrase “perpetual revolution” is likewise broad. Does this eternal round enact the second commandment of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”—“It Must Change”—being a scene of the “booming of the new-come bee” (II, ii, 21), of perpetual “beginnings, gay and green”(II, x, 21)? Or it is “a withered scene” for which we should feel some unease because, to echo earlier lines from “It Must Change,” “it has not changed enough. It remains, / It is a repetition” ( i, 15, 16-17)? It remains difficult to say because, once more, Stevens’ lexical choices allow for no one definitive explication of his meaning. For example, we should probably not discount the possibility that in his deployment of the phrase “perpetual revolution,” Stevens was pleased to provide a witty segue into his portrait of Lenin, playing, that is, on the phrase “permanent revolution,” first used by Marx and Engels and championed by Leon Trotsky to describe the ongoing role of the proletariat and peasantry in bringing about the ultimate overthrow of the capitalist state.<sup>27</sup> Welles, at least, may have caught the allusion. But especially the word “revolution” would most certainly have had more poetic than political significance for Stevens himself, inhabiting, as “swarm-like” does, a significant semantic field for the poet. Early and late, the poet makes use of variants of *revolve* to meditate together the manner of the world’s turning and the ways that we turn the world over in our minds.<sup>28</sup>

Much else could no doubt be said about Stevens’ “Nietzsche in Basel.” One might, for example, seek to explicate more fully the relation between Lenin and Nietzsche, and likewise

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<sup>27</sup> Trotsky developed the concept at length in *Permanent Revolution* (1931).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, “Sombre Figuration” (iii, *CPP* 589), and especially “The Sail of Ulysses” (vi, *CPP* 465).

examine the relation between political radical, radical philosopher, and the other three persons named alongside them at the end of Canto III: Calvin, Queen Anne, and Pablo Neruda.<sup>29</sup> What even this brief sketch of Stevens' "Nietzsche in Basel" suggests, however, is a certain informed resistance to "the Nietzschean" on the part of the poet.

#### Influence and Affinity.

In describing Stevens' relation to Nietzsche's ideas as rather more ambivalent than has been frequently asserted, I might seem to owe a certain debt to Harold Bloom's theory of anxious influence. But in fact, although Bloom in *The Poems of Our Climate* names Nietzsche alongside William James, Bergson, and "probably Schopenhauer" as "part of the notion" of the "philosophical anteriority of the will in Stevens" (7), and while Bloom discusses at length his poet's misprisions of Emerson and Whitman, he repeatedly seems to place Stevens' Nietzsche *outside* his own theory of the Will to Power over anteriority. According to Bloom, indeed, as we shall see, Stevens was quite sanguine about his poetic philosopher precursor, affirmatively reproducing multiple aspects of his forceful thought.

At this point, it might be useful to review Stevens' own well-known disparagement of any suggestion that he was in any profound way "influenced" by Nietzsche's thought: either positively or negatively. While the poet admitted to having read something of Nietzsche at two distinct periods of his life, first around 1917 and beginning again in late 1942, seemingly on the

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<sup>29</sup> My own tentative sense is that all five are figures for states of mind which, while powerfully transformative were not "poetic" in the sense Stevens explained in "A Collect of Philosophy." See my preface, above.



prompting of Henry Church, his remarks on the subject are generally evasive when not dismissive. More than once in letters to Church, Stevens is moved to strike preemptively against any surmises of correspondence between his thought and that of Nietzsche. For example, when Church makes casual mention of rereading Nietzsche in a letter dated June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the poet is swift to insist, “my interest in the hero, major man, the giant, has nothing to do with the Biernensch; in fact, I throw knives at the hero” (*L* 409). Similarly, in a letter of January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1945, to José Rodríguez Feo, Stevens tartly dismisses all notions that his “major men” of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” were in any sense “Nietzschean Shadows” (*SM*, 40).<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding his recurring protestations of dubiety and distaste to Church about the substance of the philosopher’s thought, however, Stevens actively sought out works by Nietzsche, expressing some hope, in June, 1944, that a full set might “put itself together during the summer” (qtd in Leggett, 39).

The question which has haunted my project, however, is what works of Nietzsche Stevens read between 1917 and 1922, and how seriously he read them. As I will review in the following chapter, Canto VII of “Sunday Morning” has inclined readers to suspect that Stevens knew at least something of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as early as 1915. A 1906 journal reference to “the idea of the Universal Superman” (*L* 89), and a comment in a letter to Elsie Moll from 1913 regretting Reading, Pennsylvania, as “too, too human” may well be, however, as Milton Bates suggests in his *A Mythology of Self*, “phrases caught on the wind. . . [which] serve to remind us that Nietzsche was much in the air in the first decades of [the twentieth] century” (249). All that one can claim with fair certainty is that sometime around 1917 the poet was interested enough in

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<sup>30</sup> Feo first contacted Stevens in 1944 as the editor of the Cuban review *Orígenes*.

Nietzsche to have taken note of four volumes of his work, although the particulars of this small event can only be inferred from a letter Stevens wrote to Henry Church on January 5, 1943. Here, Stevens observes to his friend,

You might be interested to know that I have now picked up the Nietzsche books I had in mind. There are only four volumes; they were published at 8s. 6d., yet sold for \$7.50 in New York. I am quite sure that the ones I have are the ones I saw twenty-five years ago. The ones that I have are *A Genealogy of Morals*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Case of Wagner*, and *The Dawn of Day*.

(qtd. in Leggett, 36).

Stevens' comment on the original selling price may indicate that he has just purchased the four-volume *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* itself first published in London by T. Fisher Unwin in 1908 for 8s. 6d. each.<sup>31</sup> (If Stevens did, in fact, purchase the Unwin edition, it is worth noting that within the volume titled *The Case of Wagner* he would have found as well *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Anti-Christ*.)

In 1943, Stevens would recall having "seen," twenty-five years previously, the Unwin edition of Nietzsche, presumably in a New York bookshop. Did Unwin's volumes in particular attract the poet's attention in 1917 because he was then already well familiar with any or all of its texts: *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the compilation in *The Case of Wagner*, and *The Dawn of Day*? Or was he drawn to the Unwin edition because it contained texts he had only glanced at, having earlier read *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science*, or *Beyond Good and Evil*? He would, of course, have had access to the New York Public library's

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<sup>31</sup> I thank Don Childs for pointing to this possibility.

considerable holdings of Nietzsche's works, both in the original German and in translation.<sup>32</sup>

The poet's early letters to Elsie Moll confirm that he spent many hours at the library reading and taking notes, particularly during his first ten years in the city. In a letter dated May 4, 1909, for example, he speaks of a routine of "days at the office, early evenings at the library" and a few days later expresses the wish that he had preserved in his journal "even a small part of the notes" he had taken there (Blount 188, 191). As Bates points out, Stevens could have read Nietzsche in the original, having taken six semesters of German at Harvard, and, indeed, while Bates's critical examination of the role of Nietzsche in the poet's "mytholog[ies] of self" ultimately deals with affinities and does not presuppose direct influence, he does at one point affirm Stevens as having been "actively interested in Nietzsche . . . [in] the years before and during World War I" (248).<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the precise dimensions of this interest seem permanently lost to us. Was "The Surprises of the Superhuman" which Stevens composed for his "Lettres d'un Soldat" series nothing more than the flippant consequence of a casual dip into H. L. Mencken's popular study? Or was this poem's debt to the philosopher even looser, a response to some Nietzschean "phras[e] caught on the wind"? Or did Stevens' thoughts on *Übermenschlichkeit* in fact come

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<sup>32</sup> Stevens was a regular patron of the Astor Library throughout his first ten years in New York, and then of the New York Public Library which, with the Astor's books transferred to its shelves, opened on May 23, 1911. From the time of his earliest visits, Stevens would have had access to German editions of *The Dawn of Day*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, *The Case of Wagner*, *The Gay Science*, and *The Dithyrambs of Dionysus*, all published before 1900. Also on the shelves by the end of the first decade of the twentieth-century were German editions of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and a French translation of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Stevens could also have perused Nietzsche's *Nachgelassene Werke: der Wille zur Macht* (1901), a number of Nietzsche's letters in the original German, and a number of English commentaries including H. L. Mencken's influential *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1913).

<sup>33</sup> In his 1898-99 year, Stevens attended lectures in German on Goethe, Lessing, and Schiller.

from his own reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*? We simply don't know.<sup>34</sup>

In all of this, it is worth emphasizing that Stevens' resistance to having any aspect of his work referred to Nietzsche was very much characteristic of a poet who seems always to have taken very deliberate steps to avoid (or distill) the enchantments of other strong voices. Thus Bates in his introduction to Stevens' common-place book *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets* [sic] remarks on its pages being conspicuously free of notations from modern works of literature, and observes further that *Beau Sujets* "reflects a mind that . . . acquired knowledge unsystematically, in the way Frost compared to picking up burrs while walking in the fields" (2). But Stevens' method of acquiring knowledge was perhaps not as fortuitously random as Frost's evocative image suggests. Stevens' description of his reading habits in the spring of 1909 to his fiancée Elsie Moll suggests rather a *deliberate* lack of system that would thereby permit his thoughts to mingle unconstrainedly with those of others—at least in theory: "I make notes as I read on little slips of paper which, it is true, I throw away before long, but which are interesting for a while" (qtd by Bates in *Beaux Sujets* 5). Evidence of Stevens' determination to assert originality is found in another letter to Elsie early in the same year: "Quotations have a special interest, since one is not apt to quote what is not one's own words, whoever may have written them. The "whoever" is the quoter in another guise, in another age, under other circumstances."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For a general introduction to the question of the impact of Nietzsche on English and American literature, see Patrick Bridgwater. For particular attention to the reception of Nietzsche in the first decades of the twentieth-century, see Wilfried Van Der Will. For detailed insight into the impact of Nietzsche on American literary theory, see all of the essays in *Nietzsche in American Literature and Thought*, edited by Manfred Pütz.

<sup>35</sup> Stevens' observation here is quoted as an epigraph in Bates' introduction to the poet's common-place book, *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets*. The original unpublished letter is at the Huntington Library.

That Stevens' hostility to the very idea of precursors did not abate with the years is indicated in his reply of July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, to Hi Simon's musing about the possibility of a French symbolist influence in his poetry: "I have read something, more or less, of all the French poets mentioned by you, but, if I have picked up anything from them, it has been unconsciously. It is always possible that, where a man's attitude coincides with your own attitude, or accentuates your own attitude, you get a great deal from him without any effort" (*L* 391).<sup>36</sup>

That Stevens himself thus denied all significant engagement with Nietzsche complicates any attempt to suggest otherwise, though the poet's own words give us grounds to suspect obfuscation on the subject of what he read and what he took from this reading. But there is a further, and far more intractable, obstacle to any attempt to extrapolate the particulars of Stevens' early engagement with Nietzsche (as opposed to "the Nietzschean") and that is the deep-rooted suspicion of the very idea of influence amongst some of the most prominent Stevens' scholars, most particularly within that small, but distinguished, community that has sought to describe the significance of Nietzsche to their poet. Heavily inflecting the approach of these critics to the "question" of Stevens and Nietzsche has been the fact that Nietzsche is, bar none, their philosopher of choice, as one who sweeps away outmoded ideas, causality and influence in particular.

Discovering a number of "Nietzschean" ideas in Stevens, including the philosopher's theorizing on the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses in art, his doctrine of "perspectivism" and his celebration of becoming over being, a number of these readers of Stevens have shown a particular sensitivity, in their own practice, to Nietzsche's critique of causality. Pugnaciously

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<sup>36</sup> For insight into Stevens' complicated relation to French poetry, see Lisa Goldfarb, Albert Cook, and, of course, Michel Benamou.

first set forth in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche's attack on causality is further developed, with characteristic wit, in *The Twilight of the Idols*, where he diagnoses the "error of false causality" as arising out of an unexamined faith in the existence of three things: will, motive, and a sovereign ego. Over this last piece of naiveté Nietzsche crows,

And above all the ego! It has become a fable, a fiction, a play upon words; it has altogether ceased to think, to feel, and to will! . . . What follows therefrom? There are no spiritual causes at all! The whole of the alleged empiricism that seemed to be in their favour has gone to the devil! That follows therefrom! (*TI VI*, iii).

This is not the place to judge the philosophical merits of Nietzsche's attack on causality. What is of immediate interest here is the fact that the "Nietzschean" readers of Stevens have made Nietzsche's assault on causality and empiricist filiation one of the central tenets of their craft. Thus, in their explications of the "Nietzschean" in Stevens, the term "affinity" is used to gesture to areas of concordance between poet and philosopher, while the entire concept of influence which so depends on the notions of ego, will, and motive is rejected.

It was against the fiction of influence that J. Hillis Miller announced, in his famous two-part essay "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" (1981), "The relation between text and precursor text is devious, problematic, never a matter of direct cause in effect" (334). In an analysis which may have offended as many literary critics as it inspired, Miller reflects in 1981 on the "inner drama or warfare of current literary criticism," with the advent of the so-called "theory wars," and divides scholars into two uncongenial camps, the "uncanny" or Apollinian / Dionysian critics and the "canny" or Socratic critics, respectively. While Miller extends an olive branch at the end of his essay, suggesting that "the task of criticism in the immediate future

should be the further exploration, as much by practical essays of interpretation as by theoretical speculation, of this coming and going in quest and in questioning of the ground” (348), he is by no means a neutral herald of the field of battle. It is rather with the distinct air of announcing the losers in the lists that Miller characterizes so-called “canny” critics in terms of Nietzsche’s Socratic thinkers, whom the philosopher chides for their “imperturbable belief that, by means of the clue of causality, thinking reaches to the deepest abysses of being, and that thinking is able not only to perceive being but even to *correct* it” (*BT*, italics in original 15 ). In stark contrast, the uncanny or Apollinian / Dionysian critic, according to Miller, launches himself bravely out over the *Abgrund* (abyss), which he knows to be bottomless, and follows not “the clue of causality” but the *mise en abyme* of language. A compounded avatar of Ariadne and Arachne (though invariably gendered masculine by Miller), the “uncanny” critic works to “interpre[t] or solv[e] the puzzles of the textual web” by following innumerable threads of seeming logic through the labyrinth, but he can never escape the maze because he has extended it yet further with his commentary. For Miller, then, “criticism is the production of more thread to embroider the texture or textile already there. This thread is like the filament of ink which flows from the pen of the writer, keeping him in the web but suspending him also over the chasm, the blank page that the thin line hides” (337).<sup>37</sup>

It is in such a position, over an abyssal chasm bravely spinning threads, that Miller himself reads Stevens’ “The Rock” in the first part of his essay. His reading is a *tour de force* of concentration, but for all readers interested in the place of Nietzsche’s thought in Stevens it is

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<sup>37</sup> Notably, however, even Miller cannot resist the romance of meaningfulness. Observing that the work of an uncanny critic will regularly reach a point where all logic fails, he names this “abyssal” moment as “the moment of their deepest penetration into the *actual* nature of literary language” (339, italics added).

doubly important as it declares “The Rock” a proof of the universal condition of language as *mise en abyme*, a groundlessness theorized with particular force by Paul de Man’s and Jacques Derrida’s readings of Nietzsche in the 1970s. As Leggett observes in his lucid summary of the state of the question on Stevens and Nietzsche in his first chapter, however, Miller’s thesis is not without its problems. In an admirably “canny” analysis of Miller’s reading of “The Rock,” Leggett politely, but thoroughly, demolishes his compatriot’s claim that Stevens’ poem is exemplary of the fact that “*all* poems deconstruct themselves . . . [as] *mises en abyme*” (5, italics in original). He observes that far from being exemplary of any universal condition of language, “The Rock” seems rather revealed, inadvertently, by Miller, to be “irreducibly idiosyncratic,” and, ironically, as “a unique, intentional text” (5). While Leggett credits the brilliance of Miller’s neo-Nietzschean reading of Stevens’ late poem, he diagnoses the insightful critic blind to the fact that “the very perfection of his illustration disqualifies it for any general illustrative function” (6).

Notwithstanding this possible limitation in his argument, Miller’s sketch of a “Nietzschean” (that is, especially “Derridean”) Stevens, along with the work of such critics as Joseph Riddel, has had a significant impact on the study of Nietzsche in Stevens, producing a strange mixture of license and rigidity in the calculations of degrees of convergence between philosopher and poet.<sup>38</sup> That is, within the paradigm of intertextuality, license to classify the works of Nietzsche as “precursor texts” for the texts of Stevens while prohibiting the application of the causal parameters “will, motive, and ego” has invariably led to readings in which philosopher and poet are in general agreement, or affinity. In the absence of such concepts as

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<sup>38</sup> For example, while Miller makes the critique of causality the theoretical bedrock of his reading, he seems to invoke a narrative of influence in his discussion of the “echoes” of Emerson and Whitman in “The Rock,” 21-24.



“will, motive, and ego” arguments for *dis*-affinity become more difficult to make. If one removes the traditional kinds of causal connection, e.g., the notion that a poet is responding to a text because he has read it, there is nothing to connect texts, that is, little basis for discussing them together, except a relative harmony of perspective. The state of the question on Stevens and Nietzsche has thus evolved to be startlingly unanimous on one point: that the relationship between poet and philosopher was, however attenuated and tangential, invariably positive, even to the point of being replicative. Off limits to “uncanny” readers of Stevens would be the poet’s own observation in his *Adagia* that “The poet must not adapt his experience to the philosopher” (*CPP* 909) since it presupposes a struggle of egos, an act of will. But even “canny” readers of Stevens, that is, those committed at least to some degree to pursuing the question of whether and how Nietzsche *influenced* their poet, and who have therefore to some extent made recourse to the structuring principles of will, motive, and ego, have tended to conceive this influence as invariably positive in origin and end.

Such inclination to interpret conjunctions between Nietzsche and Stevens in positive terms can be seen clearly in two “influence” studies, both published in the 1980s when the so-called “theory wars” were at their height: Milton Bates’ aforementioned study of Stevens’ central personae, *A Mythology of Self* (1985), and J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton’s examination of the shared import of Nietzsche and Ernst Cassirer in Stevens’ idea of a “supreme fiction,” *The Fluent Mundo* (1988), considered in my preface. Among the first of critics to deal substantively with the place of Nietzsche in Stevens’ thought (all readers since are indebted to him for his painstaking reconstruction of the known facts of the case), Bates focuses on the question of whether or not the American poet’s “major man” owed a direct debt to the German philosopher’s

*Übermensch*.<sup>39</sup> Evidently very much a “canny” critic by Miller’s lights, Bates begins his investigation of the possible significance of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* to Stevens’ “major man” by reminding the reader of his poet’s life-long attraction to the heroic ideal as that which might “lend nobility to life” (235). Having isolated some of the more stable attributes of Stevens’ protean hero—among these, an ambiguous nature at once superlative and abjectly limited—Bates introduces the matter of Nietzsche with notable confidence: “Stevens’ major man did in fact have something to do with the overman. . . . Nowhere else in Stevens does one have an intellectual influence whose sources and extent can be specified with as much certainty” (248). Evidently determined to defend his “canny” practice, however mildly, Bates observes that “merely to gloss Stevens’ poems with passages from Nietzsche would of course be an exercise in futility. One wants to know why Stevens found Nietzsche’s ideas attractive at just this moment in his career, and how he modified them to suit his own purposes” (248). In pursuit of these questions, Bates offers thoughtful comment on the ways in which Stevens’ hero, like Nietzsche’s own, took partial root both in religious disillusion and in the experience of war.<sup>40</sup> Bates finds, moreover,

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<sup>39</sup> Earlier, Frank Doggett’s *Stevens’ Poetry of Thought* (1966)—the first full length study of Stevens as a thinker—had pushed Nietzsche quite literally into its margins as short footnotes. That is, while Doggett—having emphasized in his preface that his book is no source study, that he quotes from “philosophic passages . . . only in order to bring out the latent concepts of the poetry” (x-xi)—repeatedly delineates and explores the common ground between Stevens’ ideas and those of Schopenhauer, Bergson, Santayana, and William James, among others, he alludes to Nietzsche directly only twice and both times seems at pains to assert his insignificance, or at least lack of originality.

<sup>40</sup>Citing Eric Bentley’s study of hero-worship in Carlyle and Nietzsche, Bates notes that it was “upon witnessing an awesome calvary charge” while a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian war that Nietzsche “became convinced that the desire to overpower was the motive force of life itself” (257). Where Bates identifies the Second World War as the event which “moved Stevens to reflect seriously upon the hero” (258), I will argue that it was the First World War that moved him to this reflection.

significant overlap in Nietzsche's and Stevens' investment in human creative will. He notes, "while [Nietzsche and Stevens] appealed to different models of human history, they agreed that men create heroes—as well as gods and poetry—in order to dominate reality" (261). Such statements make good on Bates' earlier declaration, summarizing in advance of his own explication, that the heroes of the poet and of the philosopher "are similar because they were shaped by similar needs and aspirations" (255).

Yet, as Bates' own evidence suggests, "major man" and *Übermensch* are hardly comrades-in-arms however much they were "shaped by similar needs." That is, while the "major man" was very likely shaped by his author's knowledge of the Overman, this knowledge seems to bear fruit less in terms of identity, than in terms of difference. As Bates reminds us, Nietzsche yearned for a "glimpse of a man that justifies the existence of man, a glimpse of an incarnate happiness that realises and redeems, for the sake of which one may hold fast to *the belief in man!*" (*Genealogy of Morals*. I xii, italics retained). Stevens likewise hearkened all his life after "the master of life, or the man who by his mere appearance convinces you that a mastery of life is possible" (L 518). Yet, as Bates himself shows, beyond their common root in a quasi-religious faith in human creative will, the respective heroes of Nietzsche and Stevens have significantly different *raison d'être*. Noting that "the overman is his own reason for being; his value lies, not in any effects he might produce, but in his very superiority to ordinary men and their affairs," Bates goes on to observe that "the overman's autonomy was part of his general critique of goal and purpose" (263). This is in contrast to the "major man" whom Stevens envisioned as "a means to enhance the quality of life" (Bates 265). That is, while Stevens meant his "major man" to be the champion of the imaginative life, he did not mean him to apply a

sledgehammer to the status quo. Stevens was, after all, a man who at nearly thirty was still inclined to express his longing for the “sacred” in terms of *propriety*: “It would be much *nicer* to have things definite—both human and divine. One wants to be decent and to know the reason why” (*L* 87, italics in original).

Moreover, as Bates himself concedes, and his poet’s own projection of the “major man” as a member of “the commonal” confirms, Stevens was “far more tolerant than Nietzsche of the general run of humanity” (262). First named explicitly in “Repetitions of a Young Captain” (1944), this early version of Stevens’ “major man” is an accretion of power both brutally real, coming out the “calculated chaos” of war, and utterly spectral, being a product of a “make-matter, matter-nothing mind” who “accoutred in a little of the strength / That sweats the sun up on its morning way / To giant red,” leaves behind him not warmed life, but “years of war” (III, 4, 9, 6-8). Notably, however, Stevens’ “young captain” distinguishes himself from this fearsome “giant” who “make[s] more than thunder’s rural rumbling” (III, 2), observing at the end of the stanza that “My route lies through an image in my mind, / It is the route that milky millions find, / An image that leaves nothing much behind” (III, 16-18).

Stevens’ second explicit reference to the “major men” occurs in “Paisant Chronicle” (1945) where again we find the poet meditating on the nature of the heroic as something both composed of reality and “beyond” it. Here, the “route that milky millions find” towards their heroic ideal is even more emphatically celebrated over the warrior’s road: “What are the major men? All men are brave / All men endure. The great captain is the choice / Of chance,” the poem’s opening verse asserts. And at the end of this poem we are told that “the major man” may be a most burgherly sort: “He may be seated in a café. There may be a dish of country cheese /

And a pineapple on the table.” And yet, as Joseph Riddel observes in *The Clairvoyant Eye*, the “major man” is “not a form so much as sense of human possibility” (174). It is, finally, this sense of the humanly possible that we are left with in the “major man’s” last explicit appearance in the final canto of “It Must be Abstract.” Again, however, this potentiality *is* given human shape, and, again, it is a most humble one. Having earlier rejected “the MacCullough” as a “pensive giant prone in violet space” (viii), that is, as too monumental to be a “major man,” Stevens proposes that the closest approximation of his hero of the imagination may be found in a Chaplinesque figure who wanders plaintively “beyond the town” in a tattered coat and “slouching pantaloons . . . / Looking for what it was, where it used to be” (15, 15-16).

That Stevens should have chosen to project this sadly comic figure as the *apotheosis* of “the major abstraction . . . the idea of man” (x) suggests a most original, and decidedly non-Nietzschean, claim for the heroic potential of the human. Where Nietzsche’s hero was projected to be “contemptuous of the ‘herd’ . . . a mountain-dweller and a solitary” (Bates 261), Stevens’s “fictive man” might be found, as we have seen, “seated in / A café.” As readers of “Loneliness in Jersey City” (1938) or “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” will recall, Stevens was hardly innocent of the bigotries of his time, yet in the context of his projections of the “major man” / “supreme fiction,” he was notably democratic.<sup>41</sup> It is in this guise that he will, in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” propose “the man / In that old coat” as “a possible finality” (171), as Vendler puts it in her magisterial reading of the poem. One may thus be inclined to doubt Bates’ conclusion of affinity between Stevens’ and Nietzsche’s heroes. Given his stated project to assess

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<sup>41</sup> As Riddel notes in *The Clairvoyant Eye*, “As a major abstraction of the commoner [Stevens’ major man] recalls Whitman’s idyllic democrat, but Stevens sees his representative man not as a ‘literatus’ but as a harlequin in the human comedy” (174).

“why Stevens found Nietzsche’s ideas *attractive*,” Bates may have experienced a certain necessary blindness to patterns of ambivalence therein.

Nowhere is the critical impulse to read Stevens as an inveterate celebrant of Nietzsche’s doctrines more apparent, however, than in Bloom’s *The Poems of Our Climate* (1977) which remains an extraordinary benchmark in the turn of the critical tide towards a Nietzschean Stevens. While Bloom’s argument concentrates on developing the Emerson-Whitman “crossing” in Stevens, it regularly invokes Nietzsche as Stevens’ putative ancestor. Thus, for example, Bloom reading “the dew of *Harmonium* [as] a synecdoche for everything in nature that still could be thought of as pure or refreshing” finds the “motto for such dew [to be] Nietzsche’s wistful admonition ‘Try to live as if it were morning’” (144). Similarly, Bloom suggests “The Idea of Order at Key West” (1934) as the scene of “Stevens perspectiv[izing] desperately, in the Nietzschean manner, to evade the fiction of the human self” (102); identifies “How to Live. What to Do” (1936) as a “triumph of the Will-to-Power” (108); finds “the triumphant snap of . . . [the] ‘That’s it’ which begins the final canto of ‘A Primitive Like an Orb’ (1950) to be “essentially Nietzschean, recognizing as it does that the pleasure of art ensues from a willing error, . . . because truth either is or becomes death” (217); and names Nietzsche “the presiding intelligence” (226) of “*Esthétique du Mal*” (1944). With similar conviction, Bloom asserts that “[d]ance, in Stevens as in Yeats, is always a Nietzschean trope” (180), and later that the poet possessed a “Nietzschean distrust of the subject as being only another fiction” (238).

In his own survey of Nietzschean critics of Stevens, Leggett points out that Bloom’s method of constructing his Nietzschean poet is characteristically free-wheeling, even cavalier: “Bloom both dismisses traditional source study and engages in it when the evidence is present. .

. .The result is that [he] moves back and forth between two positions—Nietzsche as source, Nietzsche as interpretative strategy. He pushes to its limits the tension between source study and reading as free play” (12). But where Bloom’s carefree approach to source study seems strategic, there is an intermittent lapsing in the application of his own theory of anxious influence which may be less calculated, may even be unconscious. That is, as the previous selection of quotations from *The Poems of Our Climate* suggests, over the course of his analysis of Stevens’ strong misreading of the poets of American Transcendentalism, Bloom frequently adopts an entirely “traditional” idiom to speak of Stevens’ engagement with Nietzsche, a philosopher whom he names alongside Freud in his first chapter in *Poetry and Repression* as one of the “strongest poets in the European Romantic tradition” (2). If Nietzsche is therefore one of the “strong poets” in Stevens’ genealogy, why does Bloom not regularly find the author of “Esthétique du Mal” “antithetically ‘complet[ing]’ [this] precursor” (*Anxiety of Influence* 14)? While Bloom repeatedly refers to Nietzsche’s “anteriority” to Stevens, particularly in terms of the Will to Power, he never explicitly maps this anxious intersection.<sup>42</sup> Where is the misprision in *reproducing* Nietzsche’s will to power in “How to Live. What to Do,” in showing Stevens and Nietzsche to share a love of the dance? Bloom’s lapse into a psychologically uninflected reading of Nietzsche in Stevens suggests that he, like many other celebrants of the “Nietzschean” in Stevens, beholds Nietzsche as somehow immaculate, outside the interpretative act, beyond the text.

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<sup>42</sup> Bloom uses the term “anteriority” to challenge the commonplace idea that literary tradition—ie. *posterity*— is a benign influence on modern poets. According to Bloom, modern poets suffer from the sense that they have come too late, that all has been said before and more powerfully by their greater precursors. Thus in *The Anxiety of Influence* he speaks of modern poets being “in gladiatorial dialogue with the collective personae of Anteriority” (45).

It is with acute awareness of the traps awaiting the art of explicating a Stevens-Nietzsche conjunction that Leggett advances his own aforementioned study of the “Nietzschean intertext” in the early Stevens. In concentrating on the “Nietzschean” in Stevens’ early poems, Leggett broke new ground. Where particularly Bates and Leonard and Wharton focus on what one might call the fulfilment of Stevens’ Nietzschean inclinations in his mature work, Leggett identifies this orientation as flourishing in the poet’s earliest published poems. Through a series of interconnected close readings, Leggett builds a careful argument in support of an “intertextual reading” of the Nietzschean in Stevens, finding the poet to share in particular the philosopher’s conception of art as the product of tension between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, his celebration of the “innocence of becoming” over the dessicated doctrine of Being, and his doctrine of perspectivism. Although Leggett concedes that his “version of intertextual reading is admittedly impure—practical rather than theoretical and single-minded in its pursuit of the relations between two sets of texts,” he insists that such impurity is in fact enabling:

My motive in bringing together texts by Stevens and Nietzsche is not to say anything about the origin of Stevens’s poems or to identify sources but to produce readings. One value of intertextuality is to allow us to read aspects of a text that are otherwise unreadable, to propose new perspectives, and to identify different ideologies at work in the text, and these results obtain even when the question of influence is deferred. (viii)

As Leggett points out, his use of the “texts” of Stevens and Nietzsche, rather than their “works,” deploys “Barthes’ distinction between the work, which is concrete . . . a repository of definable meaning, an object of consumption, and the text, which is a methodological field (experienced



only in an activity or production) . . . [and] an object of play or production rather than consumption” (84).

### Reality and the Sufficient Imagination.

Central to Leggett’s understanding Stevens’ affinity to Nietzsche is his explication of a number of Stevens’ early poems as reproducing both the aesthetic and ontological assumptions of perspectivism, as insisting always on the figure of the artist as interpreter—*not* as exegete—and as sharing Nietzsche’s conception of a world that, as Danto puts it, “toss[es] blackly like the sea. . . . without distinctions, a blind, empty, structureless thereness . . . . a mystical, ineffable vision of a primal, undifferentiated Ur-Eine, a Dionysiac depth” (96-97). Midway through his initial discussion of Stevens’ use of perspectivism as “stylistic pluralism”—a term coined by Alexander Nehamas to describe how Nietzsche’s “most multifarious art of style” functions always to “make it impossible to get used to his presence [as an author / interpreter] and, as we do with many of the things we take for granted, to forget it” (40)—the literary critic maps an intertext between Stevens’ early poem, “Of the Surface of Things” (1919) and Nietzsche’s early essay “On Truth and Lies in their Nonmoral Sense,” noting in particular that both poem and essay conclude with a male figure drawing his cloak over his head. For Leggett, this scene in both texts serves “to suggest something of the nature of metaphors—specifically, the manner in which they must of necessity come between the human perceiver and the “enigmatical x’ (*OTL*, 83) that has no character apart from interpretations of it,

whether in poets' fresh metaphors or in philosopher's stale ones" (165).<sup>43</sup> I discuss Leggett's treatment of "Of the Surface of Things" at greater in length in my fourth chapter. Here I would simply say that while I do not dispute Leggett's sense that Stevens, like Nietzsche, regarded the world as "enigmatical," I cannot follow him in his assertion that the poet likewise perceived "reality" as having "no character apart from interpretations of it." It is pertinent here to recall the poet's mature articulation in 1943 of "the motive for metaphor" as "a shrinking from / The weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being," as a swerving away from an "X" that, while no doubt "enigmatical," is also understood as "vital, arrogant, fatal, [and] dominant" ("The Motive for Metaphor," 14-16, 20). And so in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941) Stevens defines poetry as "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" and as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (*CPP*, 659, 665).

Though Nietzsche himself in "On Truth and Lies" takes pains to note that it is a "real storm cloud thunder[ing]" against which his Stoical man draws up the cloak of his abstractions, the philosopher casts the fatality of the world as first and foremost an *existential* challenge to be overcome. Something of the gulf which separated Stevens from the Nietzschean on the question of the "meaning of the earth," and humankind's relation to it, may be seen by comparing a passage in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* with one of the earliest poems in *Harmonium*, "Valley Candle" (1917). Stevens' poem is short, but long enough to suggest his perception of the courage and the power, but also the frailty, of the imagination and its creations:

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.

Beams of the huge night converged upon it,

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<sup>43</sup> Breazeale's translation, which is the one I refer to otherwise in my dissertation, translates "enigmatical" as "mysterious."

Until the wind blew.

Then the beams of the huge night

Converged upon its image,

Until the wind blew.

Where both Stevens' "valley candle" and the images it had cast are snuffed out by the wind—although not before producing convergence with "beams of the huge night"—Zarathustra projects *his* creative desire as unstoppable:

My impatient love overfloweth in streams,—down towards sunrise and sunset. Out of silent mountains and storms of affliction, rusheth my soul into the valleys. . . .

Utterance have I become altogether, and the brawling of a brook from high rocks: downward into the valleys will I hurl my speech.

And let the stream of my love sweep into unfrequented channels! How should a stream not finally find its way to the sea! (II, xxiii)

For Stevens the poet, the earth was always fundamentally alien—but self-possessed and complete in its *own* meaning—and in this essential otherness that was *nonetheless* meaningful, the ground for all imaginative acts that would be more than mere fancy.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, for Nietzsche the philosopher, the earth was the stage across which the *Urbemensch* would some day stride, triumphant. Zarathustra's praise for the man "who laboreth and inventeth, that he may build a house for the Superman, and prepare for him earth, animal, and plant" (Prologue,

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<sup>44</sup> See "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" for Stevens' distinction between a "work of fancy" and a work of the imagination. (CPP 648)

iv), with its parodic echo of Adam's dominion in Genesis, shows clearly the subordination of the earth to this latter-day titan. Where Stevens' poetic *required* the faith that "The clouds preceded us. // There was a muddy centre before we breathed. / There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete" ("It Must Be Abstract" iv, 9-12), Nietzsche's philosophy no less demanded that the earth be, at best, "a chaos" awaiting signification by a humankind newly awakened into its creative power.

Yet, a number of Stevens' poems, early and late, suggest the poet *was* drawn to the figure of the Nietzschean hero of the imagination, as *the* maker of values and courageous exponent of the "truth" that the only world we can know is the one we create in our mind's eye. Leggett's suggestion that we might read Stevens' perspectivism—and therein his creative *will*—as Nietzschean is thus enriching. Even so, Leggett's take on the Nietzschean in the early Stevens gives too little scope to what he himself names as a "troublesome presence" (51) of Nietzsche in Stevens. Critical in all chapters following is my contention that fundamental in Stevens' resistance to "the Nietzschean" was its veneration of the superlative human: invariably male, aristocratic, and so full of exultant Will as to *be* the very "meaning of the earth." Whereas Nietzsche valorized psychological and aesthetic mastery, Stevens made the *sufficient* acts of imagination generated by ordinary men and women, upon an earth which possessed its own meaning, however "enigmatical," both the grounds and the objective of his art. Where Nietzsche scorned the "last man" as one who, made impotent by the puerile happiness of the every day, could "no longer launch the arrow of his longing beyond man . . . [in order] to give birth to a dancing star" (*Z*, Prologue, 5), Stevens would observe in "Academic Discourse at Havana" (1923) "The burgher's breast, / And not a delicate ether star-impaled, / Must be the place for

prodigy” (iii, 36-38). Stevens’ life-long exploration of “the place of poetry in thought,” to return to Stevens’ comment to van Geysel on the eve of his reading “Description Without Place,” began in *Harmonium*, and there we find a number of spirits revealing their insistent creative will-fulness: the woman of “Sunday Morning,” the seamstress of “Explanation,” the three little girls in “Plot Against the Giant,” and the common soldier of “Lettres d’un Soldat.” In the following two chapters, I consider at length Leggett’s explications of a Nietzschean intertext in these poems, complicating his thoughtful exegesis of affinity with reflections on Stevens’ interest in the (sufficiently) prodigious imaginations of the feminine and of the commons.

## Chapter II: "Heavenly Labials in a World of Gutturals":

### Feminine Creative Will in the Early Stevens.

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
And not in this dead glass, which can reflect  
Only the surfaces—the bending arm,  
The leaning shoulder and the searching eye.

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
Oh, bend against the invisible; and lean  
To symbols of descending night; and search  
The glare of revelations going by!

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
See how the absent moon waits in a glade  
Of your dark self, and how the wings of stars,  
Upward, from unimagined coverts, fly.

(“Blanche McCarthy” 1915-1916?)

A powerful, intimidating, and mysterious figure strides through a number of Stevens' later poems, most notably, “Notes towards a Supreme Fiction.” “Give him / No names. Dismiss him from your images”(ix, 19-20), warns Stevens in the opening section of this famous poem. But critics *have* named him, frequently deploying one of the poet's own epithets for this recurring and elusive presence: “the giant.” Although this “giant” first appears in *Harmonium*, his later appearances in *Parts of a World*, *Transport to Summer*, and *The Auroras of Autumn* have attracted greatest interest. One of the earliest commentators on the giant of Stevens' mature imagination is Joseph Riddel who in his reading of “A Primitive Like An Orb” (1948) names this “bright excellence adorned, crested / With every prodigal, familiar fire, / And unfamiliar escapades” (xi, 1-3) as a “projection” of the poet's “act of mind . . . a part of himself married to

reality” (49).<sup>1</sup> Later, Riddel will summarize the giant as “a humanistic extension of finite man into creator of the infinite idea” (173). But it is Riddel’s earlier stress on the giant’s relation to “reality” which usefully reminds us that Stevens’ last giants reappear, after a long absence from his poems, in the context of the Second World War, and are associated with his search for a hero of the imagination appropriate to this newly violent reality. Such poems as “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” and “Repetitions of a Young Captain” do refer to a world at war: to oceans full of submarines, to railway stations full of arriving and departing soldiers, to patriotic parades and paratroopers, and to a woman kneeling, in prayer or grief. The precise relation of Stevens’ giant to these things of the “actual world,” however, remains ambiguous. Indeed, in “Repetitions” there appears to be not one giant, but two: against the “gold whipped reddened in big-shadowed black” of “the giant of sense,” the “make-matter, matter-nothing mind” of gigantic reality, Stevens opposes (and the young captain appears to choose) a giant who inhabits simultaneously both the real and the imagination, an “orator / Of *our* passionate height . . . [who] wears a tufted green, /And tosses green for those for whom green speaks.” Here then we may follow Riddel in finding Stevens consecrating the marriage of reality and the imagination.

But Riddel’s sense of this giant “as a humanistic extension of finite man into the creator of the infinite idea” is not a commonplace. David Jarraway, for example, judges the giants of *Parts of a World*, *Transport to Summer*, and *The Auroras of Autumn* to show Stevens demonstrating a Nietzschean refusal to project yet another “bearded peer” (284), however

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting further Riddel’s speculation that Stevens’ giant here may show critical resistance to Wordsworth’s vision in *The Prelude* VIII of the sublimity of man “‘like an ariel cross,’ atop the mountains, at the meeting point of the physical and the spiritual” (49).

apparently secularized, into the heavens. According to Jarraway, for Stevens, as for Nietzsche, the humanist project is ultimately a failure of the imagination, a “foreclos[ure] on the world’s peculiarity” (7), the futile nostalgic mustering of “yet another model of presence in things” (285).<sup>2</sup> Jarraway’s compelling thesis which has Stevens wishing above all to sustain “the question of belief,” and therefore precluding any conclusive definition of the giant, thus thinks through these “moments of enlargement” as images for an “a/theological absence that holds out the only hope for keeping the question of belief alive in all his thinking and writing to the end” (148). For Jarraway, the giant which reposes late on Steven’s poetic horizon is “the force of absence . . . the nonoriginary ‘strength’ of rhetorical figuration itself” (220), in which the “question of belief” remains blessedly forever in play. Jarraway is right to insist that we must take seriously Stevens’ own refusal to name the giant of his mature poetry—“Give him / No names. Dismiss him from your images” (“Notes”): “As the possible / impossible Supreme Absence, Stevens’ giant must destroy every foil, must evade every thought, must repel every look into his colored eyes, yet at the same time must *continue* to invite, ‘in the manner of his hand,’ all manner of ‘accurate songs’ and all method of ‘studious’ approach: ‘But oh! He is, he is’” (italics in original, 149-150).

Perhaps the only thing we *can* say for certain about this giant of Stevens’ mature imagination is that he is male: “He is, he is.” On the strength of such poems as “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” and “The Man with the Blue Guitar” there has been an understandable tendency to see

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<sup>2</sup> For further comment on the Nietzschean aspect of Stevens’ late giants see, variously, Bromwich and Kronick.



the early Stevens as likewise figuring the imagination as masculine.<sup>3</sup> According to Frank Lentricchia, the author of *Harmonium* forged overtly masculine images of his poetic creativity in anxious response to contemporary perceptions that writing poetry was a lady-like occupation. Commenting on the famous seventh canto of “Sunday Morning” which describes a “ring of men / . . .chant[ing] in orgy on a summer morn,” Lentricchia writes, “[t]he contradictions of Stevens’ early life and poetry—work, poetry, and nature itself, the conventional realm of female authority—all are reclaimed for a masculine totality, fused in an image of masculine power: Father Nature” (158).<sup>4</sup> While Lentricchia’s reading of “Sunday Morning” is in many ways persuasive, it gives too little to the woman’s own creative powers. Indeed, in pages following, I argue that Steven’s peignoured woman—and several of her “sisters” in *Harmonium*—may be read as enacting something very like a Nietzschean will-to-create, embracing as the philosopher himself prescribed, the value of illusion. It is, for example, in the full knowledge that she is projecting a fiction that the woman of “Sunday Morning” herself “devises”—or so I contend in pages following—the solacing illusion that within the “burning bosom” of death, “our earthly mothers wai[t]. . .sleeplessly” (vi, 14, 15).

Like Nietzsche, Stevens believed, early and late, that “we possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*” (*WP* III 822, italics in original), and that “lies” are necessary for our psychological and

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<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, for discussion of the role of the feminine imagination in the early Stevens see especially Mary B. Arensberg in Schaum, 23-34.

<sup>4</sup> Lentricchia’s argument here first appeared in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, and his essay prompted a spirited reply from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar titled “The Man on the Dump versus the United Dames of America; Or, What Does Frank Lentricchia Want?” Lentricchia’s own return salvo followed in the same issue.

social, as well as material, survival. Thus, the poet is that “potent figure . . . [who] creates the world to which we turn incessantly . . . and [who] gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (*CPP* 662). But whereas Nietzsche judged that “*we have need of lies* in order to conquer this [cruelly inchoate] reality, this ‘truth,’ that is, in *order to live*” (*WP* III 853, italics in original), Stevens held that poet could, at best, achieve “an interdependence of the imagination and reality *as equals*” (*CPP* 659, italics added), an interdependence that might “hel[p] us to live our lives” (*CPP* 665). Such is the judgement of the mature poet, at any rate.

Of interest to me in Stevens’ earliest figurations of his “giant,” however, are the ways in which the imagination and reality are still in some ways at odds, *not* interdependent, and patently *un-equal*. In the “giant” poems examined in pages following, Stevens’ perspective on the relationship between reality and the imagination is strongly gendered, explicitly projecting, in one case, the promise of “Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals.” It is also, at its earliest stages, rather surprisingly attuned to ethnicity. This chapter begins with opening discussion of the meditating woman of “Sunday Morning” as considerably more possessed of creative will than is often suggested. I then turn first to a number of entries in Stevens’ letters and diaries, and then to two early poems which contain his first explicit use of the figure of a giant, to consider the way the early Stevens’ understanding of poetic creativity was linked to the external landscape and—initially at least—to his early configurations of both reality and the imagination in terms of gender *and* nation. Recurrent in Stevens’ earliest extant writing are evolving representations of a guttural reality as masculine and Germanic, and a labial imagination as feminine and French.

Notably, however, what appears as definitive contrast between reality and the imagination in Stevens' earliest meditations on the subject swiftly becomes a decidedly more subtle configuration of nation and gender. Drawing together Stevens' early meditations in prose and poetry, I present a poet figuring the imagination as Nietzschean—but also as feminine. Looking towards the argument of later chapters, I will also suggest how these early poems warn that even the power of a labially Nietzschean imagination will never overcome the powers of that *Ur-giant*, the “guttural” earth.

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As I have suggested above, much of the discussion of Stevens and Nietzsche has drawn on the concept of affinity, partly because Stevens' relation to any precursors is so elusive, partly because the concept of influence is so strongly problematized by Nietzsche himself. In particular, B. J. Leggett has offered powerful interpretations of a number of early Stevens' poems as articulating a Nietzschean attitude towards the relationship between imagination and reality. Insightful as they are, however, Leggett's readings remain incomplete—and in some ways inaccurate—because they either actively negate, or do not take into account, the way these texts deliberately herald, albeit with a certain caution, the imaginative potency of “the feminine.” In this chapter, I focus in particular on Leggett's readings of “Sunday Morning” and the slightly later “The Plot Against the Giant” (1916) arguing that, notwithstanding the affinities between Stevens and Nietzsche that Leggett so ably demonstrates, these texts also show the poet affirming feminine creative will to a degree that the philosopher himself never did, at least by no means

transparently.

While detailed discussion of the question of Nietzsche's own decidedly complex attitude to women, "woman," and "the feminine" is beyond the scope of my project here, it is worth emphasizing the diverse range of opinion among Nietzsche scholars on this subject. Various addressing the "woman question" in the philosopher, for example, are Carol Diethe, who identifies a discourse of sexuality underpinning Nietzsche's thought in which "woman" is figured as a *femme fatale*: one "completely defined by the reproductive urge . . . a female predator whose sole instinct is to crave for children" (867); Clayton Koelb, who reads Nietzsche as simultaneously repelled by and drawn towards the feminine as a figure for the "power [that] resides in the place of castration" (80); Lynne Tirrell, who, while affirming that "Nietzsche's writings deliver an unhealthy dose of misogyny," finds especially in the philosopher's attack on dualism and his perspectivism "the seeds of a deconstruction of that misogyny" (158); and David Krell, who in a reply to Luce Irigaray's famous critique of / love letter to Nietzsche, *Amante marine: De Friedrich Nietzsche* (1980), argues that the "man-in-the-mountain" may be much closer to his own "She-lover, Sea-lover" (189) than Irigaray allows.<sup>5</sup>

Amongst the most influential readings of Nietzsche and the feminine is Jacques Derrida's *Spurs*, which has been read both as a coy re-inscription of philosophy's historical misogyny (and Nietzsche's own), and as a *tour-de-force* deconstruction of patriarchal conceptions of gender, in

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<sup>5</sup> For further insight into the role of "the feminine" in Nietzsche see also Shutte and Picart.

which Nietzsche is shown to be chief rebel angel.<sup>6</sup> While personally declaring for neither side in the debate surrounding the feminist credentials of *Spurs*, Leggett takes as an illuminating intertext for “Sunday Morning” its enigmatic explication of a woman-ideality-Christianity-castration nexus in Nietzsche. Particularly significant for Leggett is Derrida’s attention to two passages from *The Twilight of the Idols*, the first being Nietzsche’s identification in his progressive genealogy of the idea of the “true world,” the sorry stage at which it “*becomes feminine, it becomes Christian*” (“History of An Error,” *TI*, italics retained). The second passage of note is the philosopher’s summary judgement in the chapter which directly follows “History of An Error” that this turn to a “woman’s religion” (*The Will to Power* I, 126, quoted in Leggett, 132) is an arc into death itself:

The Church fights against passion with excision in every sense: its practice, its “cure” is *castration*. It never asks, “How to spiritualise, beautify, and deify a desire?” . . . . But to attack the passions at the root means to attack life itself at the root: the praxis of the Church is *inimical to life* . . . (“Morality as AntiNaturalness,” I, emphasis and ellipsis in original).

Noting that his interest in such commentary differs slightly from Derrida’s ontological emphases (or what Derrida calls “the enigma of truth’s nonpresence” [*Spurs*, 71], Leggett finds that in these passages, and so elsewhere in Nietzsche, “all of life that is natural and instinctive is masculine, virile, and every attempt to transvalue it as Christian morality is seen as the assumption of impotency or simulated femininity, castration” (131). And so, addressing what he earlier termed

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<sup>6</sup> Compare, for example, the readings offered by Kelly Oliver and Ellen Armour.

“the hierarchical conception of sexual identity” (124) in “Sunday Morning,” Leggett proceeds to argue that the long-standing puzzle of the identity of the woman who graces its stanzas may be resolved to some degree if we read the poem as recapitulating a Nietzschean distinction between a Dionysian figure of affirmation, a virile male who knows well how to “beautify . . . desire,” and a Christian figure of negation, a sterile (“castrated”) female who exists in a “passionless dream of being” (133).<sup>7</sup>

While I follow in significant measure Leggett’s estimation that “Sunday Morning” is Nietzschean in its celebration of “the hedonistic laws of becoming” over those of “a paradise of being” (110), I reject his correlation of the poem’s peignoured woman with the latter and especially his conviction that “the poem’s characterization of her throughout disqualifies her from ever creating poetry in the ideology of creativity that [it] assumes” (133). Leggett finds the woman subordinate and largely silent before a male speaker / poet who converts her, at the last, to his Dionysian perspective. By contrast, I believe her to be, from the outset, closer to that very position than Leggett allows, and believe that she achieves her final sense of communion with an “unsponsored” (VIII, 7) earth via her own creative will to power. It might well be observed, of course, that save the “boisterous” interlude imagined in Canto VII, the woman’s celebration of the “laws of becoming” lacks the requisite Nietzschean intensity. But then again, the secular Eden that spreads before her at the poem’s close itself hardly seems to demand much imaginative heat and light. As the woman comes to accept by poem’s end, the death that is a part of life stalks

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<sup>7</sup> As Bloom puts it, “What is the dreaming woman there for in *Sunday Morning* anyway?” (28).

her, no less than it does the whistling quail and the “sweet berries ripen[ing],” but this figure is not immediately on the horizon, and so her imaginative energies, having overcome “the dark / [e]ncroachment of that old catastrophe,” easily come to rest again in the serene contemplation that is apparently habitual to her.

A very different energy animates “The Plot Against the Giant” whose young female protagonists are figured as fighting for their very lives with the only weapons they possess: their creative wills-to-power. As Leggett shows, the young girls’ brave strategy to “undo” their guttural opponent with the power of art alone could well be read as an expression of Nietzschean perspectivism. Somewhat oddly, perhaps, given his earlier discussion of “Sunday Morning” as a text which shows Stevens harbouring Nietzschean ideas about the feminine as *instinctually* inimical to both art and life, Leggett’s analysis of “The Plot Against the Giant” does not take any account of the gender of either the young perspectivists or their fearsome adversary. Convinced as I am that the gender of these combatants *was* important to Stevens, my reading of the poem in pages following will address this issue. Considering “The Plot Against the Giant” in light of Stevens’ early predilections to figure the earth as a “giant” most “guttural[ly]”—that is, Germanically—masculine, while flagging the *successful* imagination as likewise Teutonic (and, rather surprisingly, the potentially unsuccessful imagination as Gallic), I first offer context for Leggett’s intertextual mapping of affinities with Nietzsche’s ideas on the will-to-artistic power in the early Stevens.

As my opening epigraph from “Blanche McCarthy” suggests, Stevens began to meditate very early on the power the feminine, or “labial,” imagination. In his consideration of this

uncollected poem from 1915-1916, Robert Buttel finds “Blanche McCarthy” to show Stevens’ early attraction to Symbolism and that movement’s convictions about the revelatory powers of nature. As Buttel observes, although she is “the ordinary woman, limited to a concern for appearances, for surfaces . . . the terrible mirror makes clear . . . [that] Blanche, in her dark self and in the obscure darkness of ‘descending night,’ could penetrate beyond her whiteness . . . . to a profound enlightenment” (117). Though an ephebe of day and the sun, rather than of night and the moon, the peignored woman of “Sunday Morning” (1915) is, like her dark-shrouded contemporary, first found in reverie before her dressing table mirror—or so I will suggest. Unlike Blanche, however, the woman of “Sunday Morning” is explicitly shown to be the agent of her own creative will—a will which, moreover, guides her to perceive the sky not as a “terrible mirror” but as a benign emptiness and the earth, therefore, as an “island solitude, unsponsored, free” (viii). Something of a Nietzschean at heart, the woman of “Sunday Morning” embraces this space of “unsponsored” freedom as the canvas upon which she will trace her own sustaining fictions, in the full recognition that they are nothing more.<sup>8</sup>

Another early poem, also from 1916, “The Plot Against the Giant,” offers a somewhat different take on this labial imagination, setting it explicitly against a “guttural reality.” In an uncollected essay, “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), Stevens speculates that the First World War permanently transformed the imagination because it rendered reality newly and

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<sup>8</sup> Reading Blanche as a “daughter, not of Mallarmé and of Baudelaire, but of Emerson, Whitman, [and] Dickinson,” Bloom judges her to be in potentia “a soldier in the war of the mind against the sky” (20). Indeed, while not explicitly naming Blanche a Nietzschean figure, he does so indirectly when he says that “she is a kind of older sister to Stevens’ Hoon, though she cannot be expected to know that yet” (21).



permanently violent, and it was very probably in the context of his own (remote) witnessing of that horrific struggle that he was first drawn to the Nietzschean imagination as potent enough for the most “guttural” reality. But again, Stevens was from the outset a believer in the power of the “labial” imagination, though “The Plot Against the Giant,” in particular, shows him anxious that this power might prove insufficient because frivolous, or fragile, or naïve. What both “Sunday Morning” and “The Plot Against the Giant” do seem to affirm, in any case, is that Stevens’s interest in a Nietzschean will-to-creative-power did not extend to a concomitant negation outright of the feminine imagination.

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Leggett’s reading of “Sunday Morning,” which spans some sixty pages, is humbling in its detail and theoretical sophistication as it engages most of the famous cruxes of the poem in an argument for Nietzschean affinity that draws not only on Barthes’ theory of intertextuality, but also on Pierre Macherey’s reflections on ideology. Drawing particularly on *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and *The Will to Power* and declaring his debt to Ofelia Schutte’s emphasis on a Dionysian Nietzsche in her *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche Without Masks*, Leggett argues that “Sunday Morning” traces the conversion of its peignoured lady by a male speaker from her initial position as an acolyte of the deathless—and therefore lifeless—condition of Christian being to her final stance as a celebrant of the life *and* death affirming state of Nietzschean becoming. For Leggett, “it is with Nietzsche’s hierarchy of Christianity privileged

over life that ‘Sunday Morning’ begins” (91), and with a Nietzschean “ambiguity and seductiveness of an innocent existence freed from the responsibility of a supernatural will” (116), that it ends.

As Leggett reads the poem, the dominant voice of the poem and the one whose point of view wins out triumphantly is that of a virile and spontaneous Zarathustrian prophet speaking his Dionysian catechism to the woman who, sterile and rigid, clings fearfully to the decorums of Christian dogma. According to Leggett, it is this masculine principle which dismisses, after the manner of Nietzsche, “that old catastrophe” of Christianity in Canto I of the poem, rhapsodizes the “balm [and] beauty of the earth” in Canto II, and celebrates the erotic play of desire and death in Canto III, V, VI, and VII. In Leggett’s explication of “Sunday Morning,” the woman speaks—and, indeed, thinks, but rarely. In the second half of his extended reading of the poem, Leggett even goes so far as to read her as, entirely, a Nietzschean synthesis of “feminine impotency, ideality, and Christianity” against whom Stevens opposes his masculine speaker’s equally Nietzschean synthesis of “virility, becoming, and creation and destruction” (133). Arguing particularly against Lentricchia’s charged reading of the poem as primarily mapping Stevens’ uneasy negotiation of nineteenth-century attitudes towards poetry as a feminine and genteel art, and the woman, therefore, as Stevens’ Keatsian alter-ego, Leggett insists that “the feminine self of ‘Sunday Morning’ cannot be a poet because she represents the antithesis of this creative world, and if her values prevailed this world as the source of song would be castrated, rendered bloodless and impotent” (134). But *is* the woman of “Sunday Morning” a figure for ideality and the “antithesis of the creative world,” of the procreative earth?

Much depends upon the degree of “repressed religiosity,” to use Harold Bloom’s term, that one suspects in the delinquent parishioner.<sup>9</sup> That she is not entirely at ease about playing hooky from Sunday service is made clear by the fact that when she, perhaps drowsy in the sun, “dreams a little,” she immediately “feels the dark / [e]ncroachment of that old catastrophe” (I, 6-7). But we need not assume, as Leggett appears to do, that her spirit welcomes this eclipse. Interpreting the opening five lines of the poem as the briefest flicker of the vital and “pungent” intimacy of becoming before it is snuffed out by the “silence, darkness, and distance” (92) of being, Leggett asserts that it is “the woman’s inability to accept becoming [that] leads to [a] loss of vitality, as the sensuous objects become ghostly inhabitants of the world of being: ‘The pungent orange and bright, green wings / Seem things in some procession of the dead,’ and the day itself is transformed into a mere appendage of the woman’s dream of being” (92). But Leggett’s argument turns on the precise relation between the woman and those “sensuous objects.” He implies that she is, *at heart*, apart from the world in which we find her as the poem opens, but the woman may well regard herself as chief among, or presiding over, all the things that add delight to her sun-lit Sabbath-slighting morning. And so it is, I believe, that after envisioning in her half-sleep the grim phantasmagoria of coffee, oranges, cockatoo, and her own vital self being swept over the ocean “to silent Palestine, / Dominion of blood and sepulchre” (I, 14-15), *she rouses herself*, asking sharply, “Why should she give her bounty to the dead?” (II, 1)

In claiming that the woman is an alert interlocutor of her own spiritual condition, not the quiescent pupil figured by Leggett, I draw upon Riddel’s early reading of the poem as “a

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<sup>9</sup> See Bloom 28.

meditative argument in which the poet assumes the role of his lady-subject's conscience, both presenting and interpreting her drama of self" (*Clairvoyant* 80).<sup>10</sup> Where Riddel hears the poet's (masculine) voice still dominant in the poem, however, I find Stevens more fully assuming the persona of a woman both as a foil for his own desire, and anxieties, and in pursuit of his interest in the idea of a "labial" imagination. I am able to do this in part because, like Bloom, for example, I read a significant degree of identity between the poet and his peignored woman. Naming her "the first instance of Stevens' muse, his interior paramour," Bloom argues that in this feminine figure, so deep in reverie, "Stevens addresses an aspect of himself as surely and intimately as Tennyson confronts his own early poetic psyche in Mariana" (28). Although like Leggett, Bloom distinguishes two voices in "Sunday Morning" and likewise reads the poem as a scene of instruction, he ultimately finds Stevens in argument *with himself*, with the woman articulating his need for "an *ethos*, a permanent sense of Eden, an undying joy" against his "counter-tuition . . . in praise of the American *pathos* of 'Power'" (29).<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, readers like Leggett who perceive a significant schism between the woman and the poet hear two voices maintained throughout "Sunday Morning." Thus Helen Vendler, in a reading that provides a useful counter to Leggett's explication of a Nietzschean intertext, finds the poem's words (unevenly) divided between a dominant male presence who, speaking in

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<sup>10</sup> Litz similarly discerns "a dialogue between two halves of the woman's mind, or between her lingering doubts and the reassuring responses of the poem's 'voice'"(46).

<sup>11</sup> Bloom judges that though Stevens "moves himself, as he does us, yet he cannot persuade himself. His affirmations . . . though eloquent and even Sublime, are quite derivative; they are the exultations and obsessions of the tradition, of Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Whitman, more than they are the hard-earned misprisons of Stevens himself" (29).

“gravities of resignation”(56), constitutes a “voice from the sepulcher” (57), and the woman whose “protestations” represent “some remnant of the last claims made on life” (ibid). In stark contrast indeed to Leggett, Vendler judges that “Stevens has no Nietzschean brio, and his prophecies of a new divinity are wistfully and even disbelievingly made” (55).

That two such fine readers of Stevens could diverge so markedly on the meaning of “Sunday Morning” is a testament to its ambiguity, and internal ambivalence. It is with a strong sense of how elusive the poem remains that I begin my reading by proposing a possibility that has not yet, as far as I know, been suggested: that the woman is talking to herself—at least part of the time into the mirror before which she habitually combs her hair. Too little attention has, I think, been paid to the words which begin “Sunday Morning”: “Complacencies of the peignoir.” Habitually, readers either pass over this odd little phrase or gloss it as a sensuous detail intended to emphasize the woman’s physical—if not necessarily spiritual—delinquency from the Christian holy day—and have done with it. Deferring comment on that challenging word “complacencies” to pages following, I would here point to the etymology of “peignoir” as a guide to understanding further Stevens’ meaning. Coming from the French *peigner*, to comb, the word is cognate with the Middle French *pignoer*, the box in which a woman kept her hairdressing instruments, and *peignouer*, the undergarment placed on a woman’s shoulders while she—or her maid—combed her hair (*OED*). And so the phrase “Complacencies of the peignoir” might be understood to introduce the scene of a woman deep in thought in the privacy of her own bed chamber, at least initially at her dressing table (since this is where such ladies normally combed their hair) and

thus, presumably, before her dressing table mirror.<sup>12</sup> (Here we might recall Blanche McCarthy.) All of us who have ever brushed our teeth before a mirror will recognize this moment as frequently such a time of reverie, however brief. And so it is I think that the poetic ebb and flow that is “Sunday Morning” constitutes an extended moment of such self-absorbed reflection in which the woman’s thoughts circulate anxiously around the matter of “the measures destined for her soul” (II, 15). Her protestations and questions rise swiftly and are as rapidly (perhaps too rapidly) answered by her own intuitions. (As I read it, all the questions which appear in the poem enclosed in quotation marks—save the last—are those that she herself speaks aloud. All the other questions, appearing in Cantos II, III, and VI, are her silent thoughts.) As the critical debate suggests, the various cantos can be assigned to different voices in various ways. “Sunday Morning” is clearly a dialogue of sorts, but without speakers’ cues; my argument will be that the poem can be read as the woman’s dialogue with herself.<sup>13</sup>

If we assume that she is talking to herself, then her relation to the earth becomes immediately more intimate than Leggett allows.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, however, in the opening moment of the poem, this intimacy seems rather closer to the hothouse than to her native soil as neither coffee, nor cockatoos, nor even oranges are indigenous to America. As Lentricchia notes, there

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<sup>12</sup> The term *boudoir*, which belongs to a similar lexical field, might, indeed, be seen as a deliberate figure for a scene of meditation and self-reflexion, its literal meaning being “a place to sulk in” coming from the verb *bouder*, to pout or sulk.

<sup>13</sup> Most critics take a more conservative line on assigning a speaker to the series of questions that interrupt the poem’s meditative flow. Most commonly, the woman is understood to utter only the lines explicitly indicated as issuing from her.

<sup>14</sup>Buttel, for example, speaks of the poem’s “leisurely, hedonistic situation” (232).

may be a certain irony in the image of the “green freedom” of the cockatoo upon the rug: it is no less a kept bird for all its being allowed to strut around her bed chamber.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, that she has released her pet from its confinement may be read as figuring her own break for freedom from “the dominion of blood and sepulchre.” And in any case, if we assume that she is the dominant speaker of the poem, she is a woman clearly enamoured of the things of earth, first speaking of “unsubdued elations when the forest blooms” (II, 11) and then mourning the way in which Christianity has divided the world, turned the sky which should be “a part of labor and a part of pain” into a “dividing and indifferent blue” (III, 14, 16). It is she who confesses “*her* desire for June and evening, tipped / By the consummation of the swallow’s wings” (italics added). She is also close enough to the earth, and alert enough to its language, to acknowledge and fear its moments of silence, and so it is that she is honest enough to confess that she “still feel[s] / [t]he need for some imperishable bliss” (V, 2).

But it is not just the possibility that the woman arguably speaks much of the poem and is thus from the outset closer to the earth and consequently less under the thrall “of blood and sepulchre” that suggests she has more creative force than has often been acknowledged. “Sunday Morning” repeatedly figures the feminine as a source of life in ways that would seem to argue against Leggett’s reading of the woman as a Nietzschean conglomerate of feminine impotency, ideality, and Christianity. If the feminine in “Sunday Morning” is to be wholly identified with the lifeless idealizing of Christianity, why then does the poem speak of death as

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<sup>15</sup> Like Bloom, I read the cockatoo as an actual bird: not all readers do. Some critics have interpreted the bird as an embellishment in the carpet itself. See Lentricchia 153.

“the *mother* of beauty” in Canto V, presenting there a scene of youthful passion being impelled by a female deity of both death *and* desire? Stevens writes,

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams  
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves  
Of sure obliteration on our paths,  
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths  
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love  
Whispered a little out of tenderness,  
She makes the willow shiver in the sun  
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze  
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.  
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears  
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste  
And stray impassioned in the leaves.

Dissenting from a significant critical consensus which has found this canto chief in the poem’s “metaphorical proofs that it is death which makes us grasp things of the world with *élan*” (Riddel 83), Leggett judges Stevens’ assertion that “Death is the mother of beauty” to register not “a Keatsian statement about the heightened sense of life that death brings” (107) but rather a Nietzschean “affirmation of death as a good in itself, as a source for release and renewal” (110). As Leggett rightly reminds us, Stevens’ glossing of the phrase “disregarded plate” for Harriet



Munroe indicates that, indeed, the poet by no means saw death as the antithesis of life: “Plate is used in the sense of so-called family plate. Disregarded refers to the disuse into which things fall that have been possessed for a long time. I mean, therefore, that death releases and renews” (*L* 183). Weaving further the “Nietzschean implications” of the canto, Leggett marks a conjunction between its use of the metaphor of death as a wind that “strews the leaves / Of sure obliteration in our paths” and “makes the willow shiver in the sun” and the philosopher’s use of a similar metaphor in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

A storm seizes everything that is worn out, rotten, broken, and withered, wraps it in a whirling cloud of red dust and carries it like an eagle into the sky. Our eyes gaze in confusion after what has disappeared, for what they see is like something that has emerged from a pit into golden light, so full and green, so luxuriantly alive, so immeasurable and filled with longing. Tragedy sits in the midst of this superabundance of life, suffering, and delight, in sublime ecstasy, listening to a distant, melancholy singing which tells of the Mothers of Being, whose names are delusion, will, woe [Wahn, Wille, Wehe]. (20) <sup>16</sup>

There are, indeed, striking parallels between this passage and Stevens’ canto of desire, destruction, and death. But the poet’s own figuration of the “Mother of Being” is surely more positive than the philosopher’s: where Nietzsche presents the eternal round of generation and obliteration as a site of “longing,” “delusion,” and “woe,” Stevens presents this

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<sup>16</sup> Where Leggett uses William Haussmann’s translation in the Levy edition, I here use Ronald Speir’s translation from Raymond Guess’ Cambridge edition.

“consummation” of “our dreams / [a]nd our desires”(v, 4-5) as palliative—“*Although* she strews the leaves / Of sure obliteration on our paths,” she also brings to “impassioned” consciousness “maidens” who would, otherwise, “sit and gaze / Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet” (italics mine). While Stevens’ affirmation of death may well have a Nietzschean aspect—Leggett is, I think, correct to stress Stevens’ insistent linkage of desire and death—his determination to place a generous maternity at the origin of becoming is a clear departure from Nietzsche’s ambivalent conjuration of the “Mothers of Being.” Indeed, one might add this figuration of the “Mothers of Being” to Leggett’s own earlier assessment of Nietzsche’s common usage of the “X is the mother of Y” aphorism, in the context of Stevens’ contention that “Death is the mother of beauty.” Here Leggett notes that

while Nietzsche never says “Death is the mother of beauty” directly, . . . the aphoristic metaphor in which the assertion is framed is one habitual to him, and he does say that “joylessness is the mother of debauchery” (*HH*, II, 43), that “intellectual sensitiveness” is “the mother of all genius” (*JW [GS]*, 67-68), that “wounded vanity [is] the mother of all tragedies” (*Z*, 172-73), that “fear is the mother of morals” (*BGE*, 124), that “Danger is . . . the mother of morality” (*BGE*, 237), and that “Falsehood, if not actually the mother, is at all events the nurse of kindness” (*DD*, 248). (107)

That Nietzsche did not “directly” say that “Death is the mother of beauty” is hardly surprising, however, when one registers the extent to which the philosopher figured mothers as the origin of all manner of what he judges to be regrettables: joylessness birthing debauchery, vanity

conceiving tragedy, fear nurturing morality, falsehood nursing kindness. Setting Stevens' text, "Death is the mother of beauty," alongside Nietzsche's text which tells of "the Mothers of Being, whose names are: *Wahn, Wille, Wehe*" suggests that the poet's and the philosopher's valuations of feminine creative power were very much *not* identical.

That "Sunday Morning" indeed intends the feminine to be understood as a locus of procreative and creative power (therefore, of "becoming") is further suggested by the other two references to maternity in the poem. In Canto III we are reminded of Jove's "inhuman birth," "inhuman" because "No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave / Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind," and in Canto VI we are presented with a poignant alternative to a Paradise which guarantees the reunification of loved ones (provided they are "saved" first). Those who find the promise of such consolation false and hollow may rather "devise," that is, construct, within the "burning bosom" of mother Death, with full knowledge of its illusory and makeshift nature, a space for "our *earthly* mothers waiting, sleeplessly." The point of this scene of "mystical," but not transcendent, beauty seems to be that it counterpoints the dreadful absence of the merest twinge of "inarticulate" desire in the Christian idea of paradise, and so "reaffirm[s] . . . the primacy of earth."<sup>17</sup>

Again, as Leggett reads "Sunday Morning" much of the argument of the poem belongs to the male speaker, and we hear the woman's voice twice only within the marked quotations in Cantos IV and V. That "Sunday Morning" does witness a woman talking to herself, however, is

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<sup>17</sup> See A. Walton Litz's foundational study of Stevens' poetic development, *The Introspective Voyager*, p 49.

further affirmed by Canto VI where the speaker, commenting on the deathless/ lifeless stasis of paradise, a place which, while it mirrors earth's geography of longing ("with rivers like our own that seek for seas / They never find"), forever denies its *inhabitants* both the pleasure and the pain of desire: "Alas, that they should wear our colors there, / The silken weavings of our afternoons, / And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!" Leggett passes quickly over this puzzling eruption, perhaps because both its subject and idiom are hardly the stuff of the virile male rhapsody that he is glossing. Indeed, what is being described here is the feminine work of sewing and embroidery and the repeated pronoun "our" makes clear that the speaker identifies in some direct sense with this labour. But in speaking here as she does, the woman of "Sunday Morning" also proves herself an able critic of Christianity, seeming to recall the familiar medieval and renaissance tableau of opulently dressed angels plucking the music of the spheres upon their favourite instrument.<sup>18</sup> Meditative in the warm sun, the woman regrets that the silken products of the seamstresses' art, and even the music of the "insipid" lute, should have come to be appropriated as figures for the deathly beauty of paradise. It is, again, in contrast to this scene of stasis and sterility that the woman argues that the beauty begat by "mother" death is a "mystical," but nonetheless immanent, scene of desire for our original primordial loved ones, our mothers, endlessly deferred.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The delicate sound of the lute perhaps contributed to its popular depiction as the instrument for angels. Hortense Panum speaks of the lute having "an honoured place in the celestial orchestras" depicted in the sacred art of the Middle Ages (428).

<sup>19</sup> Leggett, by contrast, identifies these mothers, "spared from the sleep of death, waiting for us to join them in paradise," as partaking in the Christian illusion and suggests that they symbolize yet further our departure from the world of becoming in which death is "the

It is, I would argue, to relieve the painful tension of this longed for, but never to be realized, reconciliation with “our earthly mothers” that the woman next proposes to herself a scene of erotic “fellowship” between earth and sky, men and mountains, a celebration made all the sweeter for its being understood to be both illusory and ephemeral:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,  
Not as a god, but as a god might be,  
Naked among them, like a savage source.  
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,  
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;  
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,  
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,  
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,  
That choir among themselves long afterward.  
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship  
Of men that perish and of summer morn.  
And whence they came and whither they shall go  
The dew upon their feet shall manifest. (VII 12-15)

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destructive mother of the “burning bosom” (112). Such a reading, however, distorts the poem’s clear assertion that it is “*within*” Death’s “burning bosom” that we picture our mothers waiting up for us.

In reading this perhaps most famous canto of “Sunday Morning” as a kind of erotic dream emanating from the woman’s consciousness, I directly contest Leggett’s explication of it as a Nietzschean “affirmation of the innocence of becoming” absolutely antithetical to “peignoiored woman’s passionless dream of being” (133). As Riddel notes, this passage’s “ritualist chant has a Whitmanesque breadth” (84)—but we might also read a more direct debt to the American bard: reading Stevens’ peignoiored woman as the origin of this erotically charged hymn of praise for the sun and for men, we might recall the memorable projection in “Song of Myself” where a woman, alone in her house, “hid[ing] handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window,” gazes down upon twenty-eight young men bathing luxuriantly in the sea, “their white bellies bulg[ing] to the sun” (xi, 5, 16). While less suggestive of auto-eroticism than Whitman’s chant for “the twenty-ninth bather” (10), the seventh canto of “Sunday Morning” has itself considerable sensual power—particularly if one reads it as conceived in the mind of the lounging woman. Certainly, that this woman is still in her peignoir late on a Sunday morning suggests that she may well be much closer to the passions of becoming than Leggett allows. As “Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges” and “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” both also from 1915, reveal, Stevens was surprisingly frank about female sexual desire. While Canto VII is undeniably a portrait of masculine virility, this does not *de facto* make it external to the woman, as has been so often suggested.

Among those who have understood Canto VII to exclude the woman is James Longenbach, who reads Stevens’ boisterously chanting “ring of men” as a “vision of masculine camaraderie” (74) which reveals the poet’s deep ambivalence about his status as a non-combatant

in the First World War: “Imagined in the world of 1915, [the seventh canto] is not so much hedonism as desperation, an expression not only of Stevens’s desire but of his worst nightmare, the hyperbolic chant of mortal men for whom the beauty of the earth is not consolation enough” (75). Longenbach is absolutely right to insist that no reading of “Sunday Morning” can ignore the historical and social context of its composition. He is also, I believe, correct to mark the seventh canto as the moment when the war breaks into the poem. Behind that figure of men rejoicing, dancing in a ring under a summer sun and chanting their reverberating song that the trees and hills repeat, and united in “the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish,” was the contemporary fact of men facing each other in *opposing* lines, knee deep in mud and deafened by the scream of shells, slaughtering each other. Longenbach may well be correct in his suggestion that Stevens’ transmutation of this shambles into a scene of “heavenly fellowship” reveals a certain anxious envy on the part of the poet that *he* was not a soldier, but I query the notion that the seventh canto also constitutes Stevens’ “worst nightmare, . . . [being] the hyperbolic chant of mortal men for whom the beauty of the earth is not consolation enough.” Surely what this passage asserts is that “the balm [and] beauty of the earth” *should be* consolation enough: the men are, after all, in “heavenly fellowship” not just with each other, but with the ephemeral “summer morn” as well.

As I read it, the “ring of men” in “Sunday Morning” is a figure of complete communion with the earth’s ebb and flow of existence: “divinity . . . live[s] within” each man and nowhere else—and, above all, without egotistical projection. Leggett reads Canto VII as figuring “the dynamic continuity of the whole of life,” and as expressive of the way in which the “Dionysian

impulse breaks down the barriers erected by the ego and offers the continuity of existence in which the individual is submerged in the natural rhythms and cycles of the earth” (108). Where I depart from his reading is in understanding the woman to be the imaginative source of this upwelling of erotic connection.

Two years later in “Lettres d’un Soldat,” or so I will argue in my next chapter, Stevens would produce a decidedly ironic portrait of the “common soldier” and his sacrifice. “Lettres d’un Soldat” is not a transcript of consolation. “Sunday Morning,” by contrast, suggests a poet still content to rather blithely trope upon the war, able for example, to transmute the death of soldiers into a figure of bravely joyous prodigality: of individual lives being gaily sacrificed within the “heavenly fellowship” of all other earthly and mortal things: “And when they came and whither they shall go / The dew upon their feet shall manifest.” Notably, these last two lines in Canto VII emphasize that each of these chanting men will make his own mark upon the earth—though this imprint will swiftly vanish.

This reference to the ephemeral dew from the grass of the earth upon the feet of the chanting men recalls the final lines of the opening canto of “Sunday Morning” which marks how the day is suddenly “stilled for the passing of the [woman’s] dreaming feet / Over the seas, to silent Palestine.” Again, as I read it at least, the woman does not stay dreaming and drifting over the earth for long, but rouses sharply to defend herself against the residual incursions of her former faith. She might even have risen from her chair, with the force of her conviction, and planted her feet firmly on the rug, determined to share “the green freedom of [her] cockatoo.” In the moment of the poem’s opening, she apparently still needs to justify to herself her choice of a



sunny chair over a hard church pew, but I would contend that the psychological pull of the “old catastrophe” of Christianity is not the only thing holding her back from fully acknowledging that “the bough of summer and the winter branch. / . . .are the measures destined for her soul” (II, 14-15). Arguably, the most serious obstacle to the woman’s burgeoning desire to live upon the earth in “heavenly fellowship / . . .[with things] that perish” is not the residual hold that the Christian myth has over her spirit, but rather her own egotistical materialism.

For Lentricchia, “Sunday Morning” reveals Stevens’ ambivalence about the increasing commodification of life and culture in early twentieth-century America. Noting that the poem’s “site of production is New York, and the poem comes, in fact, at the end of almost fourteen years of mostly unhappy New York life,” Lentricchia observes how

[e]veryday life in New York dramatized for [Stevens] consumer capitalism as a frustrating spectacle of surreal narcissism: “Everybody is looking at everybody else—a foolish crowd walking on mirrors.” In this social setting, desire assumes mimetic form, and all commodities . . . become the mirrors of romance, promises of fulfillment quite beyond the explicit use of commodities: entries into an existence definitively more pleasurable than one’s own, and available for a price. .

. . Only nature is exempted by him from his mimetic economy of desire. (149)

Drawing together Lentricchia’s and Leggett’s very different perspectives on the poem, I read “Sunday Morning” as recording the woman’s effort to break free from this mimetic economy and from the world of “foolish crowd[s] walking on mirrors” so that she may overcome her ego and enter into the “dynamic continuity of the whole of life.” I suggest that the poem traces her *self-*

*directed* turn away from the “complacencies of the peignoir,” where her own ego had dominated (perhaps especially in her moments of “complacency” before her looking-glass), towards “the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish.” It is this arcing movement of her consciousness from the self-centred solitude of her sunny boudoir to the communal “isolation of the sky” at dusk that finally finds her *participating* in the Dionysian scene of becoming—“the dynamic continuity of the whole of life” (Leggett 108). Where the poem may indeed begin with the woman looking at her reflection into her dressing-table mirror, it ends with her gazing out the window into a gathering dusk so full of life, yet also full of portents of death. What begins in complacency, ends with equanimity. While not yet fully belonging to “the heavenly fellowship / [o]f [things] that perish,” the woman of “Sunday Morning” is closer to that condition. And finally, the prospect before the woman as her poem ends is, notably, a return to Stevens’ origins. What began as a seeming paean to a hothouse world—again, neither coffee, nor oranges, nor cockatoos are indigenous to America (and hardly acclimated to its North East corner)—ends as a poem of a more austere climate, one closer to the poet’s own native sense of the earth.

### The Giant and the *Übermensch*

In the last piece of prose he ever wrote, “Connecticut Composed,” Stevens concludes that “going back to Connecticut is a return to an origin . . . an origin of hardihood, good faith, and

good will” (*CPP* 896).<sup>20</sup> Earlier in the short essay, he identifies the “thrift and frugality,” but also the ingenuity, dignity, and capacity for happiness, of the “Connecticut Yankee” as the product of determined struggle not just to survive, but to thrive, in a region of hard-scrabble. We get a clear sense of Stevens’ quiet pride in having become a native son of this austere soil in his description of a train journey he had just taken east by north across the state.

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. . . . 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 the other states do not exist. . . . 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. When the spring was at its height we should have a water-color not an oil and we should all feel that we had a hand in the painting of it, if only in choosing to live there where it had existed. Now, when all the primitive difficulties of getting started

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<sup>20</sup> “Connecticut Composed” was written for the Voice of America’s “This is America” series in 1955.

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. We think of the state not only as matrix, but as the very mother, above all in the spring, when the reward of discipline is visible and tangible, or seems to be. We seem to be conscious then, more than at any other time, of the extent to which those who helped prepare each present season are a part of it, and of the extent to which the nature of the land is part of them and of ourselves. (*CPP* 894-5)

I quote this excerpt in full to emphasize not just the elder Stevens' evidently heart-felt sense of identity with and ease in austere New England, his quite material sense of continuity with the generations before him who have "endure[d] and master[ed]" this spare region, but also his sense of the region as a *maternal* soil—"not only as a matrix, but *as a very mother*, above all in spring." In spring especially, this mother is, notably, an artist, and so too are the people she nurtures, for "When the spring was at its height we should have a water-color not an oil and we should all feel that we had a hand in the painting of it." Here New England as the "original" earth—broadly speaking, the site of America's first founding—is a territory in which reality and the imagination are interdependent equals, and each is, in significant ways, feminine.

How differently Stevens had conceived the landscape flashing by outside his train window—and the appropriate imaginative response to it—fifty-one years before. Always a lover of marathon walks, Stevens took a particularly lengthy stroll on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1904, out before dawn from his apartment in New York—"from Undercliff to Fort Montgomery . . . just failing of West Point. A good 42 miles" (*L* 71). No doubt bone-tired, he had returned in the evening by rail.

Although his long walk had filled him with rapture, his journal entry from the following day recalling his ramble ends fretfully:

One word more. I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds . . . [which] still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His garden + orchards + fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there nevertheless. And it is a proper question, whether or not the Lilliputians have tied him down. (*L 73*)

Depending upon when Steven caught his train, he may not in fact have seen much of New York state flashing past his window that evening: he stopped walking at half past six and dusk would have come about an hour later. But that Stevens' reflections on the "giant" earth had, in any case, little connection to the physical landscape, to "the character of the state" through which his train rumbled on that spring night is suggested by his concluding comment deriding one of his fellow passengers: "a girl . . . with a face like the under-side of a moonfish. *Her* talk was of dances + men. For her, Sahara had no sand; Brazil, no mud" (73, italics in original). For the twenty-five year old Stevens, the "giant" at large outside his train compartment that night was a projection at once primitive and sublime, a categorically masculine counter to the puniness of a superficial and complacent—and here egregiously effeminate—humanity.

Whether this crucial figure owes a debt to Nietzsche's *Übermensch* must remain an open question. What is clear is that both stand in opposition to complacent bourgeois culture. While there remains no evidence that Stevens had any reading knowledge of Nietzsche in 1904, his journal entry suggests that he would have concurred with Zarathustra's exhortation to a crowd of burghers to spurn the lure of contentment:

Alas! there cometh a time when man will no longer launch the arrow of his longing beyond man—and the string of his bow will have unlearned to whizz!

I tell you: one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: ye have still chaos in you.

Alas! There cometh the time when man will no longer give birth to any star. Alas! There cometh the time of the most despicable man, who can no longer despise himself.

Lo! I show you *the last man*.

“What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?”—so asketh the last man and blinketh.

...

“We have discovered happiness”—say the last men, and blink thereby.

(*Z*, Prologue, italics in original)

Clearly, for Stevens, the young woman chattering of “dances and men” on the train that night came by her happiness too easily. The man who earlier on that “absolutely cloudless day” had thrilled to walk under the soaring arc of the sky— “God! What a thing blue is!” (72), Stevens

exclaims at one point in his journal entry—might well have received Zarathustra’s talk of “arrows of longing” and “dancing stars” enthusiastically.

About Zarathustra’s own sublime projection of the ultimate *conjugation* of humanity and earth, in the figure of the *Übermensch*, however, the aspiring poet might have felt some reservation. Stevens’ sense of the natural world as a “disparate monstrosity,” as a sphere both material and mythic that will *always* exceed our “Lilliputian” attempts to contain or shape it—whether actual or metaphorical—stands in contrast to Zarathustra’s exhortation to be as a “ploughshare” (Z II, xxvii) in readying “earth, animal, and plant” (I, iv) for the one who would “*be the meaning of the earth.*”(I, iii, italics in original). In my fourth chapter, I discuss at some length Arthur Danto’s explication of Nietzsche’s view of the world as “a blind, empty, structureless there-ness” (96). For Leggett, Stevens’ early poems follow Nietzsche on this point, “accept[ing] a world without meaningful distinctions as the ground on which our varied interpretations impose their patterns” (179). I will argue, on the other hand, that Stevens’ early anthropomorphic projections of the earth rather suggest he perceived it as an inherently meaningful entity, though profoundly other. This early sense of a meaningful earth would come to full maturity in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”: “There was a muddy centre before we breathed. / There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete” (I, iii, 12-15). All of this said, his journal entry of 1904 suggests that, if he had read Nietzsche, the young Stevens would have beheld the *Übermensch* as a compelling figure of creative will. Nietzsche’s invocation of the needs to exceed burgherly decorums resonates strongly with Stevens’ early evocation of the earth as physically, and therefore psychically, monumental.

As it happened, however, the figure that loomed out of the April darkness as Stevens returned by train to New York at the end of his marathon walk was rather less *Übermensch* than ogre—an atavistically fearsome presence which would reappear in more abstract form years later in “Domination of Black” (1916):

At night, by the fire,  
The color of the bushes  
And of the fallen leaves,  
Repeating themselves  
Turning in the wind.  
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks  
Came striding.  
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks. (1-10)

Following an unsettling meditation on the commingled “turning” of the leaves and the peacocks tails, and again the latter’s “cry,” the speaker will recall his fear as “the night came, / Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks” (33-34). That such an atavistic vision of “the real” had considerable hold on Steven’s imagination is evidenced by the appearance of a similar figure in “Like Decorations,” nearly two decades later:

The sense of the serpent in you, Ananke,  
And your averted stride  
Add nothing to the horror of the frost



That glistens on your face and hair. (xii)

As Milton Bates observes, Stevens here uses “Ananke” in “the classical sense of fate or necessity” (187).

As Bates notes further, however, this ominous presence would appear again only a year later, in 1936, in “The Greenest Continent” (“Owl’s Clover”), but in a very different guise, “stand[ing] for ‘essential imagination’ (*L* 370)” and “symboliz[ing] pure poetry, an entity alike indifferent to regional differences and the day’s news” (*ibid.*)<sup>21</sup> That something of such a lord of the imagination—though decidedly less atavistic, and indeed more *human*—had, in fact, long been latent in Stevens is suggested by a very different “Giant” who appears very early in at least the poet’s private lexicon. Surviving among his 1908-09 courtship letters to Elsie Moll are several in which the physically imposing Stevens signs himself “Giant.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps it was Elsie who first named him thus, and no doubt her fiancé was proud to affirm his 6' 2" self as a tower against which his diminutive fiancée would shelter. There might also be a certain strain of courtly self-deprecation in Stevens’ signing himself “Your Giant.” So might he suggest himself to his beloved as rather oafish, but nonetheless possessed of a rough charm, not unlike that of the “Big-bellied ogres curled up in the sunlight / Stuttering dreams. . .” whose “imagined lives” conclude

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<sup>21</sup> Part of Bates’ point here, is that this Ananke as an early figure for Stevens’ “supreme fiction” will eventually be displaced by another more “compassionate, regarding humanity, ‘As if he lived all lives, that he might know’ (“The Auroras of Autumn” x, 21)” (276). See, however, Vendler’s very different sense of this figure as one of “possible extinction, the Minos or Rhadamanthus of this world” (96).

<sup>22</sup> More commonly, Stevens signed off as “Wallace” or “Buddy.”

“Inscription For a Monument,” an uncollected poem from 1916 (ellipsis in original).<sup>23</sup>

Recalling Stevens’ “old sailor” who, “Drunk and asleep in his boots, / Catches tigers / In red weather” in “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” (1915), these “big-bellied” dreamers may be significant as figures of prodigious imaginative potentia. Latent within them is Stevens’ prescription of the necessity for a “violent” imagination. Indeed, these rather un-prepossessing “ogres” might be seen as prefigurations of Stevens’ later giants of the imagination which would, as I note in the opening pages of this chapter, come to play a central role in the poetry of Stevens’ middle and late periods, where they are central in communicating his elusive conceptions of a “supreme fiction.” But the figure of the giant as it appears in his earlier poetry also plays a significant role in the development of his theory of poetry as “an interdependence of the imagination and reality *as equals*” (CPP 659, italics added). As countless of his poems and scores of his critics attest, the interplay of imagination and reality was itself one of Stevens’ great subjects. It is one, as Lentricchia, among others, has argued, that was strongly inflected by gender, with the imagination generally (but not, I have argued, exclusively) figured as male.

But Stevens’ perspective at this early juncture was expressed not just by a metaphorical association of both reality and imagination with masculine / macho giants, but also by a metaphorical association of both reality and imagination with German and French culture. Repeatedly in the early Stevens (particularly in his journal and letters), one encounters praise for Germans as a people rooted in the earth and in this rootedness correspondingly “at home” in their

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<sup>23</sup> It was perhaps in the same spirit that Stevens, in another letter to Elsie written in May 1909, named himself “Caliban.” (CS, 196).

imaginations. As I shall argue, in Stevens' meditations on the nature of "the German" we find early evidence of his mature convictions that the imagination must be sufficient to its reality, that reality and the imagination must be interdependent equals. In striking contrast to this sense of Germanic sufficiency are intermittent suggestions that to engage reality in a "Gallic" manner is to risk insufficiency, to prove inadequate before the powers of earth.

In suggesting that things German (or things conceived as such by the poet) *were* a considerable source of fascination for Stevens, I would revise our understanding of a primary shaping force in Stevens' early work: namely his love affair with all things French.<sup>24</sup> As Buttell confirms in his foundational study of *Harmonium*, the early Stevens was a considerable francophile, avidly reading Verlaine, translating a sonnet by the sixteenth-century French lyricist, Joachim du Bellay, and once announcing in 1914, at a banquet held in his honour in Chicago by Harriet Munroe, that American poetry was lagging behind its European counterparts not "because [it was] too far from England, but because [it was] too far from Paris" (qtd. in Buttell 55). And as Stevens once told René Taupin, French translator and author of *The Influence of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry* (1929), "The lightness, grace, sound, and color of French have had an undeniable and precious influence on me" (236).<sup>25</sup> That the early Stevens

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, his comment in a letter to Elsie, dated Dec 2, 1908, "I've a notion to run over to the Library some night to take a look at the *Journal des Débats*. One must keep in touch with Paris, if one is to have anything at all to think about" (CS, 106). As the Fall 2008 issue of the *Wallace Stevens Journal* most recently affirmed, Stevens' fascination with, and love for, the France of his imagination was lifelong.

<sup>25</sup> Taupin observes further that Stevens "not only used a French vocabulary extensively, but even the movement of his sentences was French . . . . In short, Wallace Stevens was French, being related to Baudelaire by his taste for elegance and dandyism, and to Laforgue by his

was a man seduced by his vision of France as *the* locale of and gathering place for sophisticated beauty and a refined exoticism is further affirmed by a comment made to Elsie, in a letter from September, 1913, that “tonight I’d like to be in Paris, sipping a bock under a plane-tree, and listening to Madame’s parrot from Madagascar”(L181).

As it happened, however, Stevens never went to Paris and the poet’s love for France was thus largely a passion of the mind, the object of his adoration flowering like some rare bloom in a hothouse while he himself endured New York “far out on the bleak edge of the world” (L 117). As a glance through his collected letters affirms, France became very early for Stevens a figure for something not quite of earth, belonging rather to the realm of fancy, as we see in his comment from 1915, after meeting Marcel Duchamp, that “[w]hen the three of us spoke French, it sounded like sparrows around a pool of water” (L 185). At other times, France might stand for a delightful frippery, as when he commented on his friend Pitts Sanborn sailing from Havre “bringing for me my autumnal bon-bons from the Place de l’Opéra” (L 229). Even at the end of his life, France was for Stevens still synonymous with a certain indispensable *frivolité*, as two years before his death he would observe, “[w]hat a great many people fail to see is that one uses French for the pleasure that it gives” (L 792).

But Stevens’ love for the France of his imagination suffered its moments of disillusion, most critically during the First World War. In several poems that Stevens composed in 1917, including much of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” as I will show, France is made to stand, or so I shall

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nonchalant irony and the ‘Pierrot’ tone of his poems. . .” (237). For further comment on especially the question of Stevens’ debt to Laforgue, see Benamou.

contend, for a debilitating, even dangerous, failure to engage with reality.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, and crucially, this disengagement is emphasized not, as one might expect, as a simple absence of tough-minded common sense, but rather as the failure of the imagination to be sufficiently powerful: that is, fierce enough, radical enough to “pres[s] back against the pressure of reality,” which, as Stevens would go on to declare in “The Noble Rider,” is the imagination’s always herculean task in “help[ing] us to live our lives” (*CPP* 665). That Stevens should have so figured France while the war in Europe still raged, and raged largely on French soil, is surprising, to say the least. Even more startling, however, is the fact that the same poems that make France a symbol for an enervated imagination project creative potency as either implicitly, or explicitly, *German*. As passages from several early letters make apparent, Stevens had been near to obsessed with Germany in the years before the war, finding especially compelling what he regarded as that nation’s proudly enduring connection to its peasant soil.

“Connecticut Composed” confirms that such a connection to one’s soil—whether native or immigrant—was one the poet valued all his life. From first to last in Stevens, the human imagination is a titan only in so far as it engages with the giant earth. The journal entry about Stevens’ evening journey back to New York City affirms how early, and how literally, the poet conceived of this relation. Thirteen years later, Stevens would in several poems from 1917 reconfigure this Ur-giant into his first giants of the imagination, ones which remained, however—in ways that later such giants would not—demonstrably connected to their parent,

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<sup>26</sup> In what follows, then, I will be resisting Frank Kermode’s passing comment that “Lettres d’un Soldat” was “very characteristic of the poet’s Francophile mood” (8).

being at times gutturally, even ogrishly, at one with the realities of earth. In its less ogrish, but no less reality-oriented, guise, this early giant would have a decidedly Teutonic inflection. This ascription of ethnicity is less startling—though still surprising in the context of its genesis during the First World War—when one realizes that Stevens was, at least for a number of weeks in 1909, and very likely much beyond, considerably smitten with the “realistic” German imagination.

This interest is clearly visible in a series of letters he wrote to Elsie. On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1909, Stevens went to see an exhibition of nineteenth-century German paintings at the Metropolitan, and his comments to his then fiancée show a deep, if occasionally ambivalent, admiration for the Teutonic. For example, writing to her in the morning, prior to his visit to the museum, Stevens anticipates pleasurable viewing: “The Germans have sense enough to paint what they like,” but in a later aside about the origins of the florist trade jibes that this delicate art might first have occurred “in some Visigothic chaumière, perhaps—some wattled hut in Merovingia” (*L* 117). Recording his impressions later in the day, however, Stevens confesses himself uncategorically moved:

How many senses the pictures touched! I am German to the uttermost. All the exiled ancestors crowded up to my eyes to look at the *Vaterland*—to see those goslings in the water by the fence, the man and woman and baby trudging home through the rainy twilight, the meadows with the meadow trees, the oddities of undeveloped imagination, the infinite humble things.( *ibid.* )

Concluding, Stevens declares, “One would like to understand the Germans. They seem a nation

of peasants” (118). While Elsie’s reply to her future husband’s rhapsody does not survive, she evidently dissented from Stevens’ identification with his rustic forebears, provoking the poet to insist in a letter three days later, “Peasants are glorious. Think. Who inhabited Arcady? Who inhabited Sicily?. . . I do not mean your staring, open-mouthed, poor devils” (L 120). Yet Stevens’ effort to reassure his discomfited Elsie (for whom class was an abiding anxiety) surely finds him speaking somewhat disingenuously. His deep connection to and admiration for the figures in *Vaterland* was not for the inhabitants of pastoral Arcady, but for the tillers and harvesters of the humbly “actual” earth.

Stevens responded no less strongly to more recent German art. In a letter dated January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1909, the poet tells Elsie of having spent the evening reading a “capital serious” article in *Scribner’s* on contemporary German art: “You know I am still hammering at them, trying to get the feel of them.” Citing Johann Ludwig Tieck’s cataloguing of various German types, from the “war-like and pious Bavarians,” to the “handsome Thuringians,” to the “true-hearted” Low-Germans, Stevens declares a special affinity for the last: “I love them, my dear . . . . I feel my kinship, my race. To study them, is to realize one’s own identity. It is subtly fascinating” (L 127).<sup>27</sup> He goes on to describe a picture in the magazine of an iron foundry: “The mass of machinery, the hot iron, the grimy workmen—I looked at them for a long time, they were so familiar.” He concludes, “No race has ever occupied itself with the realities of life more than the Germans.—I should rather spend a year in Germany than in any other part of Europe” (ibid).

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<sup>27</sup> This sense of identity persisted in Stevens. See, for example, a letter to Barbara Church dated August 23, 1949, where he names himself a “Pennsylvania German” (L 645).

The “subtle fascinat[ion]” that the earth-bound German evoked in Stevens may show itself in two poems which contain the earliest giants of *Harmonium*. The first of these monumental figures is the title antagonist in “The Plot Against the Giant,” a figure who in his guttural monstrosity recalls the titan earth Stevens glimpsed from his train window on his night ride back to New York City. The second “giant,” or so I will contend, is the German mother in “Explanation.” The two poems appeared together in Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* (October 1917), six weeks after Stevens submitted “Lettres d’un Soldat” to Harriet Monroe. Alongside their deliberate correlation of imaginative ineffectuality with things French, these poems foreground, the former for the worse, the latter for the better, the titanic energies of the German spirit. They also foreground questions concerning the real-world efficacy of woman’s imagination. In “The Plot Against the Giant,” Stevens scrutinizes the imaginative strategies that young girls develop in response to the violence threatened by the giant, perhaps regarding these girls with something of the same eye that earlier disdained his train companion’s talk of dances and men. In “Explanation,” however, by poem’s end, the German mother, however briefly, has performed a prodigious act of imaginative resistance and in that moment at least may be read as a Nietzschean giantess of the imagination.

Unambiguously faithful to its title (a rarity in Stevens’ poems), “The Plot Against the Giant” presents three girls rehearsing their plan to overthrow a “yokel” of a giant who “maunders” about the countryside perpetually “whetting his hacker.” The stages in their tripartite assault—which presupposes a notable susceptibility to beauty in their brutish adversary—are



advanced in ascending order of aesthetic complexity and corresponding power. Thus we learn that once the first brave girl has “check[ed]” the giant in his murderous career by “diffusing the civilest” of floral “odors,” the second will “abash” him with delicate needlework, leaving him embarrassed by his own coarseness when she runs before him “[a]rching cloths besprinkled with colors / As small as fish-eggs.” Emboldened by this optimistic vision of a chastened giant, the third girl exclaims, “Oh, la. . . le pauvre!” before declaring that she will utterly “undo” him with the sound of her words alone, sounds which she describes with palpable erotic force as “[h]eavenly labials in a world of gutturals.” Her apparent conviction is that their foe actively yearns for the ravishments of graceful speech and so will bend eagerly toward the “curious puffings” of her words and be disarmed. At poem’s end the girls have not been disabused of this seductive faith.

In his study of the canonization of Wallace Stevens, John Newcomb speaks for what would seem to be a broad critical consensus on “The Plot Against the Giant” when he dismisses the poem as just one of several “weird little ditties” (64) to be found in *Harmonium*. A. Walton Litz’s foundational study of Stevens’ poetic development makes no mention of the poem, and such luminaries as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler have likewise offered little comment on it.<sup>28</sup> An exception to this critical silence is Leggett’s Nietzschean reading of the poem as a perspectivist text, one that “adopt[s] the implications of point of view as a theme” (189), partaking in something of Nietzsche’s conviction that, in Danto’s phrasing, “our ideas are

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<sup>28</sup> Such neglect is hardly deserved: as Cook notes in her thoughtful reading of the poem, “playful as it is, this is a profound fable of beginnings” (39). For insight into Stevens’ playful, and profound, use of sound symbolism in the poem, see Borroff’s “Sound Symbolism.”

arbitrary structurings of chaos, and the question is not whether they are true but whether we should believe them, and why” (72). Leggett does not elaborate on an explicit Stevens-Nietzsche intersection, however, choosing rather to read the poem in light of Anthony Ludovici’s *Nietzsche and Art* (1911), a work which rejoices in Nietzsche’s perspectivism as confirming that in necessarily interpreting the world, we create it—as artists.<sup>29</sup> Leggett points to the following excerpt from *The Will to Power* as critical in Ludovici’s formulation of the artist as Nietzschean perspectivist: “The object is, not ‘to know,’ but to schematize,—to impose as much regularity and form upon chaos, as our practical needs require” (II, 29).

Prior to considering “The Plot Against the Giant” as a perspectivist text, Leggett produces an insightful reading of “The Snow Man,” likewise invoking Ludovici, but primarily to show how Stevens’ poem moves beyond the thinking of the Nietzschean sociologist, doing, in fact, greater philosophical work. Interpreted by Leggett as a virtuoso “unmask[ing] . . . [of] perspectivism’s internal conflicts” (194), “The Snow Man” goes beyond Ludovici’s straight-up celebration of Nietzsche’s perspectivism as “offer[ing] to aesthetics the paradigm of the imposition of order upon chaos” (Leggett 185) to confront the problem that this human order is itself preordained in language, a substance thus incorrigibly metaphysical. As Nietzsche himself put it in *Human, All Too Human*, “Language contains a hidden philosophical mythology, which, however careful we may be breaks out afresh at every moment” (II, xi). So Leggett ultimately

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Ludovici was one of the primary translators for Oscar Levy’s edition of Nietzsche’s works. By referring to Ludovici’s analysis, rather than to his, or other, translations of Nietzsche, Leggett avoids some of the difficulties of attributing to Stevens a direct debt to Nietzsche. See 37-52, above.

summarizes “The Snow Man as “humanist variation” (191-2) on Nietzsche’s famous aphorism from *The Twilight of the Idols*: “I fear we do not get rid of God, because we still believe in grammar . . .” (IV, v).

Turning to explicate the Nietzschean intertext of “The Plot Against the Giant,” Leggett discerns a rather simpler convergence in which Stevens’ poem quite straightforwardly shares Ludovici’s celebration of Nietzsche’s perspectivism as underwriting the artist’s will to power over the chaos of life: “so different did ugly reality appear once it had been interpreted by the artist mind, that creating and naming actually began to acquire much the same sense. For to put a meaning into things was clearly to create them afresh—in fact, to create them literally” (*Nietzsche and Art* 76). Leggett finds Ludovici’s statement here to be a precise intertext for “The Plot Against the Giant,” observing, “Faced with a giant and inarticulate reality, the third girl, the true artist, masters it through language, the ‘curious puffing’ by which reality is at last, in the terms of the poem, seduced” (199).

At first glance, Leggett’s suggestion that the artistic “devices” (197) of the poem’s protagonists *do* succeed “in the terms of the poem” is puzzling: such a conclusion surely runs ahead of the ostensible narrative that unfolds. As observed above, the poem ends with the fate of the girls and their plot unknown. Reading on, however, one recognizes that the outcome of the encounter between girls and giant is, for Leggett, merely an academic point. Again, at this point following Ludovici’s interpretation of Nietzsche, rather than Nietzsche himself, Leggett writes,

[w]hether [the devices of the girls] could in fact succeed is a question rendered moot when we recall that we have understood this brute reality only from the

point of view of those attempting to cope with it, and they have already ordered their reality in articulating their schemes. Here again we uncover the persistent irony of perspectivism. In naming and characterizing this yokel, 'le pauvre,' so easily checked and abashed, [they] have undone the giant with language even before their plots unfold. Their confidence is based on their own creation of a mythic adversary who requires civilizing and who can be undone by mere words.

(199)

But *does* the poem present the giant as entirely the young girls' creation? The notion that the girls preemptively create and therefore control this reality through their naming, and therein (re)creating of it, fails to accommodate the giant's constant hacker-sharpening: why as part of "order[ing] their reality" would *they* create him thus? The greater likelihood is that label the giant as they will, he *is* and *remains* the hacker-wielder who may well smash to pieces their delicate ideas of order. Leggett suggests that there is no point asking whether the girls' confidence in their aesthetic power is misplaced, but this judgement requires that we ignore the ominous signs of inchoate violence abroad in the poem. Words like "maunder" and "hacker" *should* leave us anxious for the young resisters, each of whom, it is worth emphasizing, remains distinctly wary of the giant as an external and unpredictable power. (All three affirm that they shall be keeping their distance: "I shall run before him . . .").

With all due respect to Leggett, I believe that the question of the girls' plot succeeding—therein proving the resilient power of the imagination—is by no means "moot," being rather the very question that haunted Stevens in the poem. In the following chapter, I read

Stevens' "Lettres d'un Soldat" (1918) as the poet's fraught engagement with his own ambivalent faith in the imagination, being rooted in his conviction that the imagination had to become more aware of and responsive to reality as that reality grew more implacable. Here, I would propose "The Plot Against the Giant" as a preliminary reconnaissance of this difficult terrain, a reconnaissance that can indeed be read productively through the lens of Nietzschean perspectivism—but perspectivism as expressed by the philosopher himself, rather than by Ludovici. In the young girls' brave determination to view their hacker-wielding foe as one who will be conquered by their delicate arsenal of flowers, embroidered clothes and the tender eroticisms of labial speech we may find precise illustration of Nietzsche's sense of "the necessary *perspective factor*, by means of which every centre of power . . . constructs the rest of the world *from its point of view*—that is to say, measures it, feels it, and moulds it according to its degree of strength . . ." (*WP II*, 120, italics in original).<sup>30</sup>

In the evident degree of disjunction between "the rest of the world," as figured by the giant, and the young girls' "plot" to master it / him, however, we might also identify another Nietzschean intertext that serves to illuminate Stevens' meaning, Nietzsche's own stipulation in *Beyond Good and Evil* that some points of view will prove more instrumentally "correct" than others: "The falseness of a judgement is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgement. . . . The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps

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<sup>30</sup> Leggett himself cites this passage in his initial discussion of Nietzschean perspectivism, "especially as it forms the basis of Nietzsche's doctrine of the Will to Power" (193).

even species-breeding” (I, iv).<sup>31</sup> Such a question surely underlies the plot of “The Plot Against the Giant”: Will the young girls’ sense of the giant’s susceptibility to beauty prove “true”? That is, will their judgement be seen to constitute one of the “*irrefutable errors*” of man,” as Nietzsche wittily described “man’s truths” in aphorism 265 in *The Gay Science*, or as rather a bitter miscalculation for which they will pay dearly?

Where Jack the Giant Killer could only slay his foe—and all the ones who will no doubt follow after—the girls foretell an erotic coupling that may indeed bear fruit. Perhaps in this early scene of young girls attempting to seduce a challenging “reality” we might find foreshadowing of the joyous scene in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” where “Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace / And forth the particulars of rapture come.” But they may not— and so the third girl will, in fact, hold in partial check the full scope of her own point of view, her own impulse to intimacy with “the rest of the world,” her perhaps unwise over-identification with one who to this point hardly seems an ideal object for her affections. This, I think, is the meaning of the surprising interjection which introduces the third girl’s contribution to the plot: “Oh, la . . . le pauvre!”<sup>32</sup> That is, for the briefest instant, her point of view, so bravely committed to constructing the giant as one who will turn weak-kneed before her verbal wooing, goes so far as to re-constitute him as feminine, as somewhat of herself and therefore less alien, less

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of Nietzsche’s instrumental logic see Danto, 60.

<sup>32</sup> Cook, on the other hand, suggests *la* as “archaic or dialect Eng[lish], adding emphasis and evoking [the French] *là* (there)” (33).

threatening.<sup>33</sup> But then she corrects herself, reinstating the sexual difference which does of course provide the context for a potentially most fertile encounter:

He will bend his ear then,  
I shall whisper  
Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals  
It will undo him.<sup>34</sup>

But she also, and possibly in a manner most “life-preserving,” restores something of the distance between herself and the as yet unseen giant, who still roves somewhere at large over the horizon.

Like one of Nietzsche’s “free spirits,” the third girl dances especially close to the abyss. Save for her gender, she might be Zarathustra thumbing her nose at the spirit of gravity. As Nietzsche never did, then, Stevens here imagines the Nietzschean imagination as feminine, building on a figuration first projected in “Blanche McCarthy” and confirmed in “Sunday Morning.” As in these two earlier poems, however, this figuration is not without ambivalence. While Stevens seems to flag female power as valuable, even essential, he also seems to perceive it as problematic. While Leggett reads the third girl’s “le pauvre” as a triumphant expression of

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<sup>33</sup> My argument here assumes that the initial phrase, if completed, would have been “la pauvre” (the poor female creature). If some other referent were implied, (e.g., la bête), then it might be feminine merely in grammatical gender. There is no indication, however, of what such an alternative referent might be.

<sup>34</sup> The third girl’s faith in her eroticized linguistic arsenal is such that we may also choose to believe that the giant *will* be seduced by sounds so much more peaceably sweet than his own. Poems like “Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun” suggest that the latter hope was intermittently Stevens’ own secret romance. But the poet’s more constant faith was in the imagination as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without” (CPP 665).

her creative power, I interpret her sudden snippet of the French language here as flagging the possibility that her judgement may be fatally misplaced, that her imagination has *failed* to recognize and press back adequately against the force of axe-wielding reality bearing down on her. That Stevens feared that the girls could not hope to disarm the giant without resorting to some equivalent measure of imaginative violence, and that he meant to signal the weakness in their “plot” with the sudden flash of French into the poem, is strongly suggested by the parallel narrative of “Explanation.” That Stevens meant their guttural foe to stand for some earth-bound, peasant-associated aspect of a *Germanic* spirit of reality also becomes clear when the two poems are read as companion pieces.

Generally considered to be another of the “weird little ditties” to be found in *Harmonium*, “Explanation” has suffered, like “The Plot Against the Giant,” a certain critical neglect.<sup>35</sup> Its fourteen short lines present a brief exchange between a young German girl and her mother, both of whom evidently long for some transfiguration of their daily lives. To her daughter’s despondent comment that her efforts to transform an “old, black dress” by “embroidering French flowers on it” has produced nothing “by way of romance, / . . . nothing of the ideal,” the mother replies,

It would have been different,

Liebchen,

If I had imagined myself,

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<sup>35</sup> For example, despite the intriguing presence of a German “mutter” in a poem written in the year the United States entered the war in Europe, Longenbach’s insightful study into the socio-political intertext in Stevens’ poetry makes no mention of the poem.



In an orange gown,  
Drifting through space,  
Like a figure on the church-wall.

The unhappy irony, of course, is that the mother has, if only in the fleeting moment of her speaking, imagined herself gowned in orange and drifting free—but this moment evidently now makes no difference at all. And yet this imaginative flight *is* extraordinary. That a German matron, here by implication habitually garbed in a sobriety of Lutheran black herself, would think to reconfigure herself in a gown whose color and religious context together seems calculated to recall a figure such as Michelangelo’s Delphic Sibyl on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel marks a substantial seizure of aesthetic, even theological, power.<sup>36</sup> Here then Stevens fully realizes, as he does not in “The Plot Against the Giant,” the imagination *as a feminine force* successfully “pressing back against the pressure of reality” (CPP 665). Although the mother herself affirms both their efforts a failure: “It *would have been different* / Liebchen,” the final lines of the poem belie her despair as they maintain her aloft in the fiery voluptuousness of Michelangelesque orange.

More could be said about this little-studied poem. What most interests me at this juncture, however, is how its comment on the necessary violence of the imagination against “the pressure of reality” turns explicitly to both French and German to elucidate its theme. This aspect of

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<sup>36</sup> Such an extraordinary seizure of imaginative (and theological) power recalls a comment Stevens made to Elsie in a letter dated December 7, 1908: “And don’t you agree with me that if we could get the Micheal Angeloes out of our heads . . . we should find a multitude of lesser things (less but a *multitude*) to occupy us?” (L 109, italics in original)

“Explanation” *has* attracted scattered critical asides. Bates, for example, mentions the poem in the context of discussing Stevens’ intermittent anxiety over what he perceived to be the effeminacy of writing poetry, equating a dismissive comment the poet made to his wife in 1911 about his “poesies [being] like the trifling designs one sees on fans” (*L* 171) with “the French flowers the girl of ‘Explanation (1917) embroiders on her Teutonic tunic” (87). While Bates does not expand on his meaning here, his remark follows from his earlier quotation from a letter Stevens wrote to Williams Carlos Williams in the spring of 1918 describing the delights of Tennessee: “I spare you the whole-souled burblings in the park, the leaves, lilacs, tulips and so on. Such things are unmanly and non-Prussian” (qtd. in Bates, 87). In keeping with Lentricchia’s argument that Stevens was made anxious by his society’s estimation of poetry as a womanly art, one could read “Explanation” as simply slighting at least a certain kind of verse along gender lines, dismissing it as effeminate French embroidery that is no match for the Prussian manliness of black worsted reality. Yet things are not so clear-cut. While it is true that the poem’s striving protagonists are women whose decorous creative arts do not ostensibly alter the oppressive colouration of their lives, Bates’ reading of the German presence in the poem as a simple trope for a valourized masculine reality (thus his phrase “Teutonic tunic” with its connotations of a knight’s surcoat) scants the ways in which the poem itself links the German to a *feminine* reality: obviously in the “old, black dress” that both mother and daughter long to transform, but also in the mother’s use of the tender diminutive, “*Liebchen*.”

I read the poem, rather, as a more complicated version of “The Plot Against the Giant.” Here, as in that poem, aspersions are cast on French imaginative powers. That is, the third girl’s

brave but naive “le pauvre” in the face of a hacker-wielding giant finds an echo in the *Liebchen*’s futile embroidering of French flowers on an old black dress. Both activities are, in any real sense, inadequate to the task of pressing back against, let alone transforming, reality. But “Explanation” differs from “The Plot Against the Giant” in two notable and linked aspects. Unlike “The Plot Against the Giant,” “Explanation” offers a way forward for the imagination, or at least a glimpse at a will to imaginative power that would turn an old black dress the colour of flame. Furthermore, and critically, *both* reality and the imagination in the poem are figured as German.

Considered as companion pieces, “The Plot Against the Giant” and “Explanation” clearly show Stevens’ interest in the figure of the Nietzschean artist whose valiant perspectivism holds significant promise as a weapon for pressing back against a largely inchoate reality. Where the poet clearly moves beyond or outside the philosopher’s paradigm, however, is in his figuration of these artists as girls and women, and in his insistence, therefore, that the feminine be a site of the creative will to power.

Chapter III: “A Giant on the Horizon”: The Will of the Commons  
in “Lettres d’un Soldat (1914-1915)”

In the preceding chapter, I argued that “Sunday Morning” and two slightly later poems, “The Plot Against the Giant” and “Explanation,” might be read as demonstrating Stevens’ interest in a Nietzschean will-to-creative-power—one that, however, departed radically from its putative precursor in locating such an enfranchisement of spirit within the feminine imagination. In this chapter, I turn to Stevens’ infrequently studied poem series from 1917, “Lettres d’un Soldat (1914-1915),” a text surely significant to any reader interested in considering patterns of Nietzschean affinity in Stevens as it contains the single explicit reference to Nietzsche’s thought in all the poetry, namely, “*Übermenschlichkeit*” in its sixth poem, “The Surprises of the Superhuman.”<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what one might expect, however, this singular allusion has elicited only passing comment—and always to the effect that Stevens found the *Übermensch* not so surprising after all, and more or less congenial. Glossing the poem with Zarathustra’s expostulation to his brethren that “Man has [as yet] felt too little joy: that alone . . . is our original sin!” (II, xxv), Leonard and Wharton confidently affirm that “The Surprises of the Superhuman” “directly advocates a Nietzschean ‘*Übermenschlichkeit*’” (108). More cautiously, Bates in his *Mythology of Self* cites the term only to suggest that the idea of superhumanness is here being favourably contrasted to “the bourgeois concept of justice” (251). Leggett offers the most

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens’ description of a “too, too human god” in the third canto of “*Esthétique du Mal*” is often suggested as owing to Nietzsche. Among other possible allusions to, or riffs on, Nietzsche’s phrasing are the title of the poem, “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit” and the reference to a “bright *scienza* outside of ourselves” in “Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun.”

thorough analysis to date, reading “The Surprises of the Superhuman” as further evidence of Stevens’ Nietzschean rejection of idealism as that which by definition “defiles the existing world” (93). I consider Leggett’s argument at some length in pages following. What none of these readings of the “Nietzschean” in “The Surprises of the Superhuman” take into account, however, is its origin within an elaborate series of at least seventeen poems. Nor do they consider the text which was this series’ inspiration and significant source, a selection of letters written by a French soldier, a young painter named Eugène Emmanuel Lemerrier, to his mother in Paris from the frontlines during the first eight months of the First World War.<sup>2</sup> These approximately one hundred and forty letters were published under the title of *Lettres d’un Soldat (1914-1915)* in 1916, a year after the young soldier himself disappeared during a battle in the Argonne region in April 1915.<sup>3</sup>

Where previous critics have largely confined their discussion of Nietzschean affinity to “The Surprises of the Superhuman,” I here pursue the intermittent—but telling—signs of positive and informed engagement with Nietzschean ideas from first to last in its parent series. While thus

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<sup>2</sup> Glen MacLeod’s 1981 essay on “Lettres d’un Soldat, (1914-1915)” as a poem sequence is essential reading, but it makes no comment on the place of the Nietzschean therein.

<sup>3</sup> Lemerrier communicates his stoic idealism with poignant eloquence and it is hardly surprising that his letters which were first published in the *Revue de Paris* on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1915, and drawn together into a book a year later, had run through nineteen editions by 1918—with an American translation becoming available in June, 1917, two months after the United States entered the war. The publishing history of *Lettres d’un Soldat* shows it caught up in a tide of propaganda. See, for example, Theodore Stanton’s dedication in the 1917 American edition: “To the young men of America: who may be called to the colors. . . May they take as their model this young French sergeant who died bravely fighting for his country against our common foe.” Such words at the very least fail to acknowledge Lemerrier’s own ambivalence towards his “foe,” shaped partly by his knowledge of and love for the cultural achievements of Germany.

following other readers in their exegesis of an underlying sympathy with certain Nietzschean ideals in “The Surprises of the Superhuman,” however, I also perceive ambivalence in that poem’s presentation of the possibilities of *Übermenschlichkeit*. Though a much shorter poem than “Description Without Place,” it shows the same fondness for the cryptic, for highly wrought and ambiguous syntax. As I will show, while it is certainly possible to read “The Surprises of the Superhuman” as celebrating *Übermenschlichkeit*, it is likewise possible to read the poem as either mocking or ironizing Nietzsche’s ideal. A similar ambiguity is present in the original first poem of the series, “Common Soldier.” It is possible to read Stevens’ opening sketch of his soldier / poet persona both as a “last man” according to Nietzsche’s definition—one bovinely bereft of will—and as a Stevensian “major man,” a figure of creative will whose very will and creativity *depend* on his being “part, / Though an heroic part, of the commonal” (“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” I, x, 2, 6-7). Placing the ambiguous presentation of Nietzschean ideas in “Common Soldier” and “The Surprises of the Superhuman” alongside suggestive traces of receptiveness to the philosopher’s thought in at least five other poems in “Lettres d’un Soldat,” I read the series as a whole as revealing both Stevens’ significant interest in the possibilities of a Nietzschean celebration of human creativity, and his unhappiness about the way in which this celebration expressly scorns the quotidian life of the ordinary man of Main Street. Where Nietzsche’s Zarathustra derides this figure as “*der letzte Mensch*” made imaginatively impotent by his craven attachment to his “little pleasures for the day, and [his] little pleasures for the night” (“Prologue,” 5), Stevens’ speaker in “Lettres d’un Soldat,” has, by the end of his poem series, at least begun to imagine this ordinary man—so ordinary in his weaknesses, obediences, strengths, and desires—as the very ground of a renewed imaginative engagement with reality.

“Lettres d’un Soldat,” I argue, marks an originary moment in Stevens’ thinking: namely, the inception of the aesthetic judgement pronounced in “Of Modern Poetry” (1940) that in violent modernity, the imagination’s mandate has become that of mere *sufficiency*: “It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice” (“Of Modern Poetry” 9-10). Not even “sufficiency” is the mandate of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” however, as it is a very transcript of the moment when old habits of mind and art fell to rubble. In his essay “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), Stevens named the First World War as the moment when “the pressure of the contemporaneous. . . [became and remained] constant and extreme” and spoke of the need for resistance, of the need “to collect oneself against all this in poetry as well as in politics” (*CPP* 788). I read “Lettres d’un Soldat” as marking the very moment when “the theatre was changed / To something else” ( *ibid.* 5-6) under “the pressure of the contemporaneous”—though it does not say what that “something else” will be. A harried witness to the moment when the accustomed stage became obsolete, had “becom[e] an atmosphere / Of seeping rose—banal machine / In an appointed repertoire” (“Lettre d’un Soldat” xii, 3-4), Stevens’ poem series ends in deliberate disarray. Its main purpose, I argue, is to show the old theater in shambles—but also to tentatively sketch forth the barest outline of the *sufficiently* prodigious imaginative talent who will stride across the boards of the new stage when it *is* erected. In pages following, I argue that the allusion to “Übermenschlichkeit” in “The Surprises of the Superhuman” *is* a serious one, showing Stevens deliberating on the Nietzschean imagination as that which might guide the modern poet in the “construct[i]on of a new stage.” Such a task might, indeed, seem to require “Übermenschlichkeit.” But then again, ecstatic mastery, and not humble sufficiency, was the mandate of the Superman. Thus Zarathustra prays in the closing moments of “Old and New Law

Tables”: “O thou, my Will! Thou change of every need, my needfulness! Preserve me from all small victories! . . . Preserve and spare me for one great fate! . . . Spare me for one great victory!—”(Z III, lvi, 30). And so, I argue, “Lettres d’un Soldat” marks a contrasting mode of creative willing where Stevens begins to conceive of the modern poet as a hero of and for “that which will suffice,” and therein, “the commonal.”

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In the summer of 1917, Stevens read *Lettres d’un Soldat* in the original 1916 edition. Following hard on the heels of this reading came the poet’s own “Lettres d’un Soldat (1914-1915),” a series of at least seventeen poems each introduced by brief quotations from Lemercier’s letters.<sup>4</sup> While Harriet Monroe chose nine poems from those sent to her by Stevens for publication in the May, 1918, issue of *Poetry*, the poet himself would, belatedly, preserve only four of the original seventeen in the second edition of *Harmonium* (1931): “The Death of a Soldier,” “Negation,” “The Surprises of the Superhuman,” and “Lunar Paraphrase.”<sup>5</sup> Readers

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<sup>4</sup> Whatever the original number of poems, only nine were chosen for inclusion in the May, 1918, edition of *Poetry*: I— “The spirit wakes in the night wind—is naked,” II— “Anecdotal Revery,” III— “Morale,” IV— “Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces,” V— “The Surprises of the Superhuman,” VI— “There is another mother whom I love,” VII— “Negation,” VIII— “John Smith and his son John Smith,” IX— “Life contracts and death is expected.” Much could be said about this “official” 1918 version of “Lettres d’un Soldat.” Because I am interested in the initial composition of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” however, my own reading will concentrate on the thirteen-poem schema which survives from the poet’s original 1917 composition and contains, in addition to the nine poems aforementioned, “Common Soldier” as Poem I, “Lunar Paraphrase” as Poem VII, “In a theatre, full of tragedy” as Poem XII and “Death was a reaper with sickle and stone” as Poem XIII.

<sup>5</sup> The manuscript history of “Lettres d’un Soldat” is complicated. Only thirteen poems survive in manuscript. As Litz notes, that there were initially at least seventeen is indicated by the fact that the poem numbered XIII in the finished manuscript, is numbered XVII in an earlier draft (309).



have tended to concur with Stevens' critical assessment, praising especially "The Death of a Soldier," but finding the poem series as a whole unsuccessful: both technically and tonally more than a little scatter-shot. As Samuel French Morse first judged over forty years ago, "Lettres d'un Soldat" does suggest a young poet "play[ing] the virtuoso" ("Lettres," 46) as he attempts to give ideal poetic form to a young soldier's words—or an ironic revision of the same. But the relation between poet and soldier is not straightforward: the abrupt tonal shifts of the poem series seem to offer by turns respectful reprise, ironic deflection, and, to use George Lensing's word, "impertinent" parody of Lemercier's private thoughts (*A Poet's Growth* 207). I say "seems to offer" to avoid prejudging the relation between the soldier's letters and Stevens' poem sequence.

Readers have tended to identify Lemercier's letters themselves as the sole intertext for "Lettres d'un Soldat," and therefore to ascribe the poem's tonal vagaries to Stevens' inability to identify sufficiently with the idealistic soldier.<sup>6</sup> I would propose a more tangential relationship between letters and poem, believing Stevens' engagement with Lemercier's words to have been critically mediated first by the grandiloquent thirty-page preface that accompanies them in *Lettres d'un Soldat* and which praises Lemercier's sublimity of spirit. Written by the French literary critic and man of letters, André Chevrillon, these thirty pages present Lemercier's often muted, sometimes anxious, prose as a swelling rhapsody, the words of a man turned near-mystic by the war and a triumphant example of "the sublime message sent to us from the front . . . the high music that goes up still from the whole of France at war" (29). Given that he was a long-time friend of Mme. Lemercier, Chevrillon's significant involvement in the publication of letters from her son may well have been intended to console a grieving mother, but it is likely that the critic

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Litz, 73, and MacLeod, 48-55.

had other motivations besides.<sup>7</sup> As I will show, the preface frames the young soldier's letters as bespeaking the *ideal* imaginative and philosophical response to war. It is in part in the context of Stevens' aforementioned doubts about the ability of *l' imagination française* to be adequate to a newly violent reality that I read "Lettres d'un Soldat" as rejecting Chevrillon's orotund complacencies about heroism, and most particularly his closing impulse to simultaneously infantilize and beatify the "common soldier":

These men do but reflect nature. Since they have renounced themselves and given themselves, all things have become simple for them. They have the transparence of soul and the lights of childhood. 'We spend childish days. We are children' . . . This new youthfulness of heart under the contemned menace of death, this innocence in the daily fulfilment of heroic duty, is assured by a spiritual state akin to sanctity.

It is, I will argue, in angry rejection of such platitudes that one of the final poems of "Lettres d'un Soldat" finds a most earthy giant—clearly determined to survive through the assertions and action of his own creative will—stalking along to the measure of the child's rhyme: "Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to consider Chevrillon's preface alongside his *England and the War (1914-1915)*, a contemporaneous account of the Allied battle with the German "devil." Here, as in his preface, he is at pains to present the Allied soldier as an incandescently noble spirit. Thus he writes of England as "a nation of sportsmen anxious to play the game—that is, to play it scrupulously, without excitement or hatred, without ever allowing the desire to win to overcome respect for the rules; respecting also their opponent, whom they believe to be worthy of them, and whose hand, whether they won or lose, they wish, after the struggle, to grasp honourably" (47).

<sup>8</sup> Chevrillon, moreover, simplifies Lemerrier's own reflection, in a letter dated December 24<sup>th</sup>, on the "child-like" dimension of a soldier's life. Lemerrier does speak of the passing days

But Stevens' turn to a (mostly) guttural giant late in "Lettres d'un Soldat" may have been determined by other impulses as well. It is in the context of Steven's previously discussed interest in the Germanic imagination as admirably "adhere[nt] to what is real" (*CPP* 645), as "guttural" enough for this new reality, that I propose the poet's engagement with Lemercier's letters to have been secondarily mediated by his interest in a Nietzschean articulation of a war-like consciousness which would make fierce battle by thought and word against intellectual and imaginative conscription. Though Stevens' "common soldier"—so effusive in his declarations of obedience as we shall see—may appear "ever to say YE-A," like the poor donkey whom Zarathustra derides in Book III of his narrative as one who "chew[s] and digest[s] everything. . . . resid[ing] and abid[ing] where every one spitteth and spewth," I read him rather as one who, like Zarathustra, "sit[s] on high masts of perception"(lv, 2), determined to move by the beat of no one's drum but his own. And so, I contend, Stevens' primary projection of a hero of the imagination in "Lettres d'un Soldat" may be read as Nietzschean. Like Zarathustra, Stevens' "common soldier" can be heard to say "wage war. . . for the sake of your thoughts!" (*Z I.x*). But then again, when this "common soldier" sketches forth *his* vision of a "noble rider" for the New World (belonging himself to the "Old"), the figure he imagines is hardly *Übermensch*. Though emphatically earthbound and evidently prodigious within this sphere, the "common soldier's" / Stevens' "giant on the horizon" in 1917 is no Prometheus, being rather one who is projected to endure and evolve in terms which valorize the material quotidian of his existence.

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being like those of childhood, "gone before one knows it," and speaks warmly of the ways in which the horseplay of his companion soldiers is "only the surface of a deep underlying courage," but he judges that "a new youthfulness of heart" will be the gift only for "*those of us who come back alive.*"

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But what, in all of this, of the letters of the young French soldier? Whatever role Chevrillon and the Nietzschean (or Nietzsche's works themselves) may have played in shaping "Lettres d'un Soldat," Lemerancier's words form the backbone of Stevens' text which finds each poem prefaced by a fragment of the soldier's lyric prose.<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, however, Stevens puts a decidedly ironic spin on almost every thought he appropriates from this dutiful young Frenchman's letters and it is apparent that however much Stevens must have admired the soldier for his courage and shared in his passion for the arts, he could not bring himself to reproduce wholesale Lemerancier's convictions as an *exemplary* relation between the imagination and reality.<sup>10</sup> "Lettres d'un Soldat" suggests that Stevens found the soldier to be, in his delicate imaginative sympathies and sensitivities, "too noble a rider" (*CPP* 657) for the newly violent reality that the poet understood to be looming on the horizon.

As I noted in my Preface, it was nineteen years after "Lettres d'un Soldat" that Stevens categorically identified the First World War as the moment when the needs and the duties of the imagination changed—needing to become, as never before in the poet's estimation, one of "resistance." In his ensuing description of such resistance as the "conversion of . . . ominous and destructive circumstance . . . into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance" (*CPP* 789) and his designation of this conversion as partaking in the "irrational," Stevens might seem

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<sup>9</sup> "Lunar Paraphrase" is the one exception to this pattern. The epigraph which accompanies the poem in the unpublished series was supplied by Litz as the most likely candidate.

<sup>10</sup> Here I differ from Lensing, for example, who argues that Lemerancier's words have "a direct congruence with the poems flowing out of them" (*A Poet's Growth* 203).

to be advocating free-ranging flights of the imagination. This impression would be incorrect, however, as he goes on to insist that “the poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet’s role is broader, because he must be possessed, along with everything else, by the earth and by men in their earthy implications” (*CPP* 792). With the force of the historical situation, Lemercier’s letters could easily have crystallized (if they did not initiate) Stevens’ conviction about the need for a “resistant” imagination, one bravely “irrational” but always grounded in the “realities” of the earth. For Stevens, or so I will argue, Lemercier’s imaginative arsenal was insufficiently “irrational” in its traditional repertoire of consolations, and notwithstanding his evident adoration for the earth, essentially aloof from “men in their earthy implications.”

This is not, of course, to say that the poet was scornful of the brave mental struggle so evident in the poignant sheaf of letters Lemercier wrote to his mother: one could only hope to show equivalent fortitude in similar straits. There are consequently passages in “Lettres d’un Soldat” where Stevens deliberately honours Lemercier’s “act[s] of mind” as in the belatedly published version of “Lunar Paraphrase” which offers an eloquent reprise of the soldier’s comment on the power of the moon to conjure pathos. But such respectful paralleling is hardly the norm in “Lettres d’un Soldat”: it bears repeating that the majority of its poems make some kind of ironic play on Lemercier’s most sincere beliefs. How are we to understand this? Could Stevens really have written his poems to belittle Lemercier? This seems unlikely. (Indeed, some critics, scanting the poem’s many signs of irony, have seen “Lettres d’un Soldat” as an expression of Stevens’ own frustration with his own lack of engagement in the war and are

persuaded that the poet found Lemerrier a heroic figure.)<sup>11</sup> What seems more plausible is that while Stevens meant no disrespect to the soldier himself, he approached Lemerrier's letters somewhat clinically, at least in the context of writing his own "Lettres d'un Soldat," as texts representative of a particular imaginative outlook. While "Lettres d'un Soldat" seems in significant measure to be an assault on what Stevens perceived as the ineffectual fancies of *l'imagination française*, its chief target in this regard is not one young soldier's personal repertoire of consolations but rather the particular edifice of French romanticism as promulgated by such as Chateaubriand. The sentimentality and overwrought sensibility of "la vague des passions" are all too evident in Chevrillon's preface to *Lettres d'un Soldat*.<sup>12</sup>

In his eulogistic supplement to the young soldier's correspondence, Chevrillon praises the sublimity of Lemerrier as a spiritual flower of French youth whose words reveal "the mind of a complete artist [and] poet as well"(4).<sup>13</sup> By Chevrillon's estimation, the soldier "no doubt produced the best of himself in these letters; and it may be doubted whether, in the course of a successful artist's life, it would have been given to him to express himself with so much completeness" (28). Yet the very length of Chevrillon's preface suggests a certain reluctance to let Lemerrier's letters speak for themselves. In a particularly telling passage he invokes Krishna's command to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* section of the *Mahabharata* to suggest the near mystic pitch of the soldier's equanimity in the face of annihilation:

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, MacLeod, 48.

<sup>12</sup> See Chateaubriand's *The Genius of Christianity*, Vol. II, 203.

<sup>13</sup> This and following passages from Chevrillon's preface are taken from the 1917 Constable edition, translated by "V. M."

To fight with his brothers, at his own place, in his own rank, with open eyes, without hope of glory or of gain, and simply because such is the law: this is the commandment of the god to the warrior Arjuna, who had doubted whether he was right in turning from the absolute to take part in the human nightmare of war . . . . Plainly, it is for Arjuna to bend his bow among the other Kshetryas [Hindu warriors]!(11)<sup>14</sup>

That it should have been *this* passage showing Chevrillon in the full rhetorical plumage of Romantic Orientalism, rather than anything written by Lemerrier himself, that Stevens chose for his opening epigraph to “Lettres d’un Soldat,” suggests the poet’s intention to emphasize his poem as a reprise of Chevrillon’s production of *Lettres d’un Soldat*, and not just of the private letters of an unknown soldier.

Notably, however, readers of “Lettres d’un Soldat” have tended either to pass silently over the poem’s introductory epigraph, or to salute its appropriateness. Morse and MacLeod, for example, offer no comment, while Litz and Lensing regard Chevrillon’s words as a right and proper introduction to Stevens’ poetic redaction of Lemerrier’s letters. For Litz, the French critic’s rhapsody “sets the tone for the entire series,” where he sees Stevens identifying powerfully with the “tension between contemplation and action which marked Lemerrier’s brief life” (73) and thus celebrating the soldier’s own stoic turn from the tranquil delights of painting, music, and philosophy to “le cauchemar humain de la bataille.” Although Lensing argues that Lemerrier’s phrases served Stevens both “for lyrical increment and for ironic countermand”

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<sup>14</sup> Chevrillon is not without licence here as Lemerrier himself refers to the *Mahabharata* in a letter dated January 19<sup>th</sup>. Arjuna is one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* (not the *Ramayana*, as Chevrillon’s comment on the following page appears to suggest).

(210), he, too, finds nothing ironic in the poet's prefatory use of Chevrillon. Indeed, in his rather startling assertion that "in the letters of the sensitive young soldier-painter, Stevens found [an appropriate] moral posture to the reality of war . . . [namely] resignation to battle and death, not in pursuit of glory, but as natural fulfillment of a sensuously rich earthly existence" (203), Lensing seems to suggest that Stevens concurred wholeheartedly with Chevrillon's sentiments.

We can never know what Lemer cier would have thought of Chevrillon's preface: although the soldier himself had never met the critic, Chevrillon was a friend of the family and what Lemer cier knew of him he seems to have admired.<sup>15</sup> We, however, should hesitate before assuming that Stevens's assessment of Chevrillon was likewise admiring: certainly from the moment that its "common soldier" persona speaks, "Lettres d'un Soldat" suggests otherwise. The tendency to read "straight" Chevrillon's presence on the threshold of Stevens' poem may stem in part from the fact that the epigraph which introduces Poem I, from Lemer cier's letter of September 7<sup>th</sup>, might be read as a (quieter) echo of the elder Frenchman's rhapsodic allusion to Arjuna's final acceptance of his fate: "*Nous sommes embarqués dans l'aventure, sans aucune sensations dominante, sauf peut-être une acceptation assez belle de la fatalité. . .*" But then we hear from Stevens' "common soldier"—that is, *not* from a *Kshettyra*, *not* from an Arjuna-like warrior /ruler. Stevens' soldier neither declaims the commandment of the godhead, nor names fatality "beautiful," but simply notes, quietly: "No interpretative chaos. . .I accept: / War, too,

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<sup>15</sup> Speaking of his desire to meet Chevrillon in a letter dated March 17, Lemer cier writes, "I always had a love of letters, even as a child, and I am only sorry that the break in my education, brought about by myself, leaves so many blanks. I keep, however, throughout all changes and chances, the faculty of gleaning to right and left some fallen grain. Of course, as I leave out the future, I say nothing of my wish to be introduced to [M. Chevrillon] in happier times."



although I do not understand.” As I turn to Stevens’ “Lettres d’un Soldat,” I juxtapose the first discomfiting words of his “common soldier” with the last words Lemercier was known to have written his *chère mère chérie*: “Here we are at noon at the extreme point of the attack. I send thee my whole love. Whatever happens, life has had beauty for me.” Lemercier’s last words to his mother were thus a kind of grace note or benediction: an exculpatory gesture of forgiveness with beauty trumping all. He begins to write his own elegy and so initiates the expected, and consoling, process of mourning and eventual accommodation. By contrast, the first words of Stevens’ soldier in emphasizing his own melancholic incomprehension withhold such grace from both himself and his reader.

That Stevens’ intention was, indeed, to withhold the grace of easy comprehension from the readers of “Lettres d’un Soldat, 1914-1915” is suggested by the poet’s comment in a letter to Monroe dated July 18, 1917, that he hoped to send her “an outburst” before summer’s end (L 201). The word is striking: against what or whom was this outburst directed? Chief among the signs of Stevens’ resistance to *Lettres d’un Soldat* are, as I already suggested in brief above, the pervasive disjunctions, in nearly every case, between poem and epigraph. Aside from the aforementioned “Lunar Paraphrase,” only “Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces,” the fifth poem in the sequence, seems unambiguously to recapitulate the meaning of its attendant epigraph, in this case the soldier’s comment on the delicate beauty of field mice in a wood on the edge of a battlefield. All the other poems in “Lettres d’un Soldat” either significantly depart from, or enact some manner of ironic turn on, the soldier’s thoughts—in several cases, as we shall see, parodying these outright. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the few critics who have studied either the original 1917 series, or the nine poems published a year later in *Poetry*, have had to navigate the

pervasive disjunctions between epigraph and poem which so often serve to emphasize all that divides the sensibilities of soldier and poet, rather than, as one might expect, what unites them.

Admittedly, not all readers have been troubled by these lines of fracture, nor indeed even read them as such. Litz, for example, to whom all readers since remain indebted for his reconstruction of the remnants of the manuscripts of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” finds any roughness of fit between a particular poem and its appended citation from Lemercier’s letters to be nothing more than evidence of Stevens at work, “ransacking his poetic repertoire for old and new forms to express the ever-changing relations between landscape and mind, action and contemplation” (73). For Litz, “Lettres d’un Soldat” is above all an aesthetic experiment in keeping with “Primordia” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” also from 1917—these poems being self-evidently about the “ever-changing relation between landscape and mind.” As Litz reads it, Lemercier’s letters, which record his experience of the war with an acutely painterly eye, would have “jibed perfectly with Stevens’ current poetic interests, [while] enabling him to enlarge the emotional range of his art” (72).<sup>16</sup>

No doubt “Lettres d’un Soldat” does represent some such enlargement of feeling in Stevens’ art. Certainly, the wild see-sawing of tone and mood across its sections suggests a poet testing his own emotional limits, writing an “outburst” as he suggested to Monroe. Even so, Litz’s estimation of a “perfect” fit between Lemercier’s and Steven’s aesthetic sensibilities requires him to gloss over the many jagged edges between the thoughts of the soldier and those

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<sup>16</sup> In attributing “Lettres d’un Soldat” to a single voice, I follow MacLeod who finds the “common soldier” of the first poem to be the unifying sensibility of the sequence. It is possible to read “Lettres d’un Soldat” otherwise, however. Both Morse and Litz identify Stevens himself as more or less the voice of the series.

of the poet. Probably the most severe example of a misfit occurs in the third poem of the series, “Anecdotal Revery,” which finds Stevens coupling Lemercier’s plaintive declaration in a letter dated October 22, 1914, that “*Ce qu’il faut, c’est reconnaître l’amour et la beauté triomphante de toute violence*” with the following comic-macabre scene:<sup>17</sup>

The streets contain a crowd  
Of blind men tapping their way  
By inches—  
This man to complain to the grocer  
Of yesterday’s cheese,  
This man to visit a woman,  
This man to take the air.  
Am I to pick my way  
Through these crickets?—  
I, that have a head  
In the bag  
Slung over my shoulder?  
I have secrets  
That prick  
Like a heart full of pins.

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<sup>17</sup> The editors of the *Modern American Library* volume of Stevens’ poems and prose translate the epigraph here as “What is necessary is to recognize the love and the triumphant beauty of all violence” (CPP 1006). But the French is ambiguous. I follow Stanton’s determination that Lemercier believed love and beauty to triumph *over* violence.

Permit me, gentlemen,  
I have killed the mayor,  
And am escaping from you.  
Get out of the way!

*(The blind men strike him down with their sticks.)*

As Lensing notes, here we find Lemercier's triumphant beauty being "reduced. . .to a sniggering *grotesquerie triomphant*" (205). To say then, as Litz does, that Stevens here is simply "extract[ing] the essential idea" of the epigraph and "illustrat[ing] it" is surely inadequate. In the first place, it is by no means clear that "violence" is, as Litz would have it, the essence of the epigraph. Indeed, a case could be made that its core subject is "peace," depending in large part on how one reads the preposition "de." The larger problem with Litz's reading of "Anecdotal Revery," and of "Lettres d'un Soldat" in general, however, is that he repeatedly downplays the often peculiar content of Stevens' illustrations. Viewing the "triumphant matching of subject and image" which he judges to occur in the 11<sup>th</sup> poem of the series, the one which would become "The Death of a Soldier," as *the objective toward which Stevens struggles throughout "Lettres d'un Soldat" (76)*, Litz either avoids speaking of the crude motley of most of the poem or interprets such patchiness as aesthetic failure. He does not entertain the possibility that Stevens' apparent failure to match subject and image may in fact have been deliberate, appropriate to what I will assert is the dominant ironic mode of the poem.<sup>18</sup>

It must be admitted, however, that Litz is hardly alone in his refusal to read "Lettres

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<sup>18</sup> I owe my initial thinking on this subject to MacLeod's own passing observation that Stevens may have intended to make "the *breaking down* of the very abstract values that sustained Lemercier . . . the structuring theme of 'Lettres'" (*italics retained*, 51).

d'un Soldat" as an ironic text. While MacLeod allows that "individual poems sometimes bear an ironic relation to their particular epigraphs," he nonetheless insists that "Stevens' very *lack* of obliqueness, or irony, is the defining characteristic of 'Lettres'" (47, italics in original), a judgement that follows naturally from his approaching the poem sequence as a transcript of Stevens' fervent—but ultimately unrealizable—desire to conceive common poetic ground between himself and his unknown soldier. MacLeod also suggests, as Longenbach has done more recently, that Stevens' "sense of frustration over his own role in the war effort may have found temporary appeasement in the composition of 'Lettres'" (48).<sup>19</sup> Demonstrating how several of the poems do "suggest the contents of Lemercier's letters over a period of time extending both forward and back from the dates of their epigraphs," rather than being a restricted comment on their attendant citations, MacLeod asserts that Stevens "intended . . . to compose a poetic *summary* of the entire book" (46, emphasis added)—that, is, for the most part, to reproduce it without irony. Where MacLeod does admit irony in "Lettres d'un Soldat," he judges it to originate in the soldier's letters, with the poet doing little more than extrapolating Lemercier's markedly rare moments of disaffection or doubt.<sup>20</sup>

Where Litz judges Stevens to have approached *Lettres d'un Soldat* relatively dispassionately, as *materia poetica* to be reworked, MacLeod believes that Stevens' engagement with the volume of letters went far deeper: the Francophilic poet finding an "attractive alter-ego" (48) in the French soldier, but above all identifying profoundly with Lemercier's "fine

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<sup>19</sup> Longenbach is, however, more convinced of the ironies at work in the poem.

<sup>20</sup> Thus he argues that the "flip tone" of Poem IX (titled "Negation"), whose opening sally, "Hi! The creator too is blind," would appear to challenge its epigraph's confidence in "une justice impersonelle," actually recapitulates Lemercier's own ambivalence about the possibility of divine oversight.

sensibility and his passion for the arts, even at the front” (49). While acknowledging that Stevens was “either unwilling or unable to present convincingly the traditional consolations which comforted Lemercier at the end” (50)—namely, his faith in “a Higher Order” (October 14th)—MacLeod understands the soldier to have been nonetheless for the poet an exemplary hero for the imagination. Citing a memorable passage from one of Lemercier’s last letters which relates how he and his companion non-commissioned officers had kept their spirits up by humming all of Beethoven’s symphonies— “I cannot tell what thrill woke those notes within us. They seemed to kindle great lights in the cave”....(April 3)— MacLeod thus concludes:

The world of war Lemercier describes, in which finely cultivated souls are made to shine brighter and stronger through contact with the most terrible reality, is not too far removed from the world of *Harmonium*, whose two poles would later be defined by the imaginative fulfillment of “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” and the final emptiness of “The Snow Man” (49).

I resist the sweep of MacLeod’s summation here, at least as it applies to “Lettres d’un Soldat” itself. Although the original *Lettres d’un Soldat* does indeed bear witness to a high-minded young man sustained in the midst of appalling brutality by his Spinoza, Beethoven, and Corot, Stevens’ poem sequence seems intent rather upon pulling down to muddy earth many things traditionally placed at bright elevation. In his decision to follow Chevrillon’s rhapsodic allusion to the warriors of the *Bhagavad Gita* with his soldier’s cryptic submission to orthodoxy in Poem I, in his satirizing of Lemercier’s convictions about the dauntless power of love and beauty over violence in Poem III, in his rejection of traditional loci of power, both secular and religious, in Poems VI and IX, but especially in his bitter dismissal of old habits of the imagination—figured

in the “banality” of the tragic theatre and “dead” metaphors for death in Poems XII and XIII, respectively—Stevens again and again shows himself precisely resisting the traditional consolations of “higher” things.

This is in sharp contrast to Lemercier who again and again seeks to reassure his mother that his spirit remains aloft among the “higher” things, degraded by neither the banality nor the horror of war. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1914, for example, he insists,

You must find some comfort in this superb assurance that so far I have been able to raise my soul to a height, and keep it there, where passing events have not been able to get possession of it and where I promise you I will make every effort to render it impregnable.

A month later, on November 14<sup>th</sup>, the soldier writes in a similar vein in praise of “the solitude of the soul which can turn a deaf ear to everything which does not vibrate in accord with it.” For Lemercier, such vibrations were emphatically those of beauty, harmony, order. Thus of Christmas night he would recall, “The marvellous night lavished on us her stars and meteors . . . . It was the eternal longing for harmony, the indomitable claim for order and beauty and concord” (125). That Stevens likewise valued—and longed for—beauty, order, and harmony is undeniable: but as his entire corpus makes clear, these were ideas that the poet felt necessary to interrogate anew, not make reflexive obeisance to in their old world configurations. It is as part of this interrogation that Stevens’ common soldier does ultimately “shine brighter and stronger through contact with the most terrible reality,” as Macleod (159) puts it, doing so not as an elevated and impregnable soul in solitude, however, but rather as an emphatically earthbound member of “the commonal.”

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Twenty-three years after composing “Lettres d’un Soldat,” Stevens would write the aforementioned “Of Modern Poetry” which declares the poem of the imagination, that is, the imagination itself, to be

A metaphysician in the dark, twanging  
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives  
Sound passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly  
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,  
Beyond which it has no will to rise. (*CPP* 219)

At least by this definition, Lemercier was no modern able to find comfort in improvisational scores of sound which, though they might “pas[s] through sudden rightnesses,” would never ring true. Rather than mere sufficiency in the idiolect of a solitary string, the soldier found an abiding sense of repletion in the received majesty of such works as Berlioz’s oratorios and Beethoven’s symphonies, whose chords so reliably affirmed “the eternal aspiration after harmony, [and] . . . indomitable demand for the beauty and concord of order” (98). As a survey of the many authors mentioned by Lemercier in his eight months of correspondence with his mother affirms, Lemercier also found deep meaning in the Symbolist movement whose purpose, as expressed by Jean Moréas in his *Symbolist Manifesto* (1886), was “to clothe the ideal in a perceptible form.” While Lemercier declared Verlaine’s life to be “as touching as that of some favorite diseased animal” and regretted the lack of a “moral guardian to brace. . . up” the self-described *poète maudit*, Verlaine’s poems revealed to the soldier, no less than Beethoven’s Ode



to Joy, “an unquestionable intuition of the absolute” (Feb.9)<sup>21</sup>

But Lemer cier was himself a painter first and it is with such an artist’s eye that he regularly communicates especially the resilient beauty of the natural world—and his conviction that such abiding loveliness, despite human horror, could only signal a deeper and benevolent truth: “*la justice éternelle*” or “supreme wisdom,” or, as he increasingly names it towards the end, “God.” While he occasionally refers to such as Corot, it is most apparently among the Flemish and German painters of the sixteenth-century, whom he calls his “primitives,” that Lemer cier finds the greatest sustenance for his faith in the “eternal aspiration after . . . beauty and the concord of order.” Thus in a letter from November 4<sup>th</sup>, recalling a “charming tramp” through idyllic countryside, he writes,

At a distance we distinguished lofty plateaus, from which the view must have been extensive, all of whose outlines came out clearly or were easily divined in the haze. We remarked hills, covered with trees, which presented charming contours. It all made me think of the primitives and their landscapes so full of feeling and so conscientious. What fastidious majesty, whose grandeur seizes you at the first glance and whose details make such a profound impression on you.

You perceive, dear Mother, how God dispenses graces which are far above the reach of the miseries of the hour.

As this passage affirms, Lemer cier’s aesthetic sense was deeply religious and conservative after the manner of the Symbolists who regarded the scientific, rationalist bias of modernity as

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<sup>21</sup> Lemer cier mentions Lamartine, Villier d’Isle Adams, Musset, and Verlaine, among others. Of Verlaine and Musset he observes, “In fact, our two greatest poetic temperaments of the last century, Musset and Verlaine, were two unfortunate souls who had no moral guardian to brace them up, but who blossomed forth with a magnificence which intoxicates us” (Nov. 29).

anathema to the world of numina which could only *be* “divined.”<sup>22</sup> That Lemerrier himself *opposed* his aesthetic to the “modern” is revealed in a passing, but resonant, comment on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November as to how an unusual pink- and blue-toned morning mist had made his “favorite landscape, generally primitive in its precision . . . [take] on a subtlety of shades and a varied richness which rendered it essentially modern.” Continuing, Lemerrier observes how this suddenly “modern” landscape had “brought back to [him] the more intellectual suburbs of Paris with their infinite notations and their definite registers.” Two days after his recollection of early encounters with other such subtle and wayward moderns, Lemerrier is happy to find his surroundings once more “a picture of [his] beloved primitives . . . [with details] . . . clear, fine, as if engraved, and yet at the same time tender . . . [and] all delicately balanced as regards discreet and well-sustained values.” With an air of palpable relief, Lemerrier recalls the “gray atmosphere, which drove from my mind the quite modern fairyland of shades of last Sunday, took me back to that incisive conscience which moves you in a Breughel . . . Such also was the orderly and limpid profusion of the backgrounds of Albert Dürer” (November 25, 1914).

Stevens, by contrast, was a modern, playing seemingly infinite notations on a definite register—“*listening* for sudden rightnesses” on a single string, rather than hearing in his head, as Lemerrier had done, chords of universal and eternal harmony. Like Zarathustra, Stevens might say, “By divers ways and windings did I arrive at my truth. . . A testing and a questioning hath been all my travelling.” Thus Stevens’ “shearsman of sorts” in the penultimate stanza of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) exhorts us to

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<sup>22</sup>After remarking how “the senses” tutor us “without the aid of any instruction, a vague but unquestionable intuition of the absolute,” Lemerrier observes, “A poor human being, possessing, perhaps, the genius of a savant, may declare that he has not found God with his scalpel. What a shocking blunder on the part of a superior mind” (February 9th).

Throw away the lights, the definitions,  
And say of what you see in the dark  
That it is this or that it is that,  
But do not use the rotted names.

Twenty years separate “Lettres d’un Soldat” from “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” while twenty-five separate it from “Of Modern Poetry”—yet Stevens’ injunction to “throw away the lights,” to find sufficiency in the ever-changing “speech of the place,” rather than find repletion in an established script, may have roots in the 1917 poem sequence which sets itself to interrogate, resist, and begin to look beyond delicate, ritualized, and therefore dangerously disassociated habits of the imagination where, even in a scene of tragedy, “the stage [would become] an atmosphere / Of seeping rose—banal machine / In an appointed repertoire” (“Lettres d’un Soldat” XII). In 1937, with a fair show of bravado, Stevens would ring the changes on the “surprises” (xxxii, 12) afforded by his blue guitar. In 1917, constrained by his subject matter and still in the process of articulating his own theory of imaginative power, he would ruminate, in “The Surprises of the Superhuman,” on the possibility that *Übermenschlichkeit* might be our redeemer from the “banal machine.”

Here is that poem, originally, numbered VI in “Lettres d’un Soldat,” in full, with its attendant epigraph from a letter by Lemercier, dated November 26, 1915:

*J’ai la ferme espérance, mais surtout j’ai confiance en la justice éternelle,  
quelque surprise qu’elle cause à l’humaine idée que nous en avons.*

The palais de justice of chambermaids  
Tops the horizon with its colonnades.

If it were lost in *Übermenschlichkeit*,  
Perhaps our wretched state would soon come right.

For somehow the brave dicta of its kings  
Make more awry our faulty human things.

None of the commentators on “Lettres d’un Soldat” has had much to say about Stevens’—surely quite extraordinary given the context—conjuring of *Übermenschlichkeit*. The poet would have found some license, it is true, in gesturing towards Nietzsche’s overman given Lemercier’s own pantheon in which Beethoven, Schumann, Goethe figured largely. Yet the specific recourse to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* seems deliberately challenging. And so Beverly Coyle finds “The Surprises of the Superhuman” to be Stevens’ “most highly charged” poem (37), and Lensing, affirming the “surprise” of recommending the *Übermensch* in such a context, wonders if Stevens intended us to understand his proposal as “sarcastic and absurd,” or was he “earnestly proposing the remedy of the German superman?” (206).

The question of whether Stevens is mocking or proposing *Übermenschlichkeit* seems crucial for any reading of the poem. Neither Lensing nor Coyle pursues the matter, however. Indeed, the only critic to reflect at any length on the place of Nietzsche in “The Surprises of the Superhuman” has been Leggett in the context of his argument for Nietzschean “affinities” in the early Stevens. Referring to the poem from *Harmonium* (1931), a text thus shorn of its instructive epigraph, Leggett turns briefly to “The Surprises of the Superhuman” to support his argument for Stevens’ “Nietzschean” celebration of the “innocence of Becoming” over the arid and world-

denying ideology of “Being” in the earlier “Sunday Morning.” According to Leggett, the chambermaids create an idealized “palais de justice” just as the woman of “Sunday Morning” imagines the divine world of “silent Palestine,” and with the same results . . . . [“The Surprises of the Superhuman”] makes explicit the Nietzschean assumption that controls the first stanza of “Sunday Morning”; the effect of a belief in the divine or the ideal is never neutral in regard to the real in that the very postulation of a world that does not exist defiles the existing world.

(93)

But surely the poem is not so easily summarized. What, for Leggett, is the status of *Übermenschlichkeit* in relation to the “ideal”? By Leggett’s definition, Stevens could be proposing yet another “world that does not exist” in his allusion to the changes that might be wrought by an engulfing “Superhumanness.” Of course, the *Übermensch* itself is presented categorically by Nietzsche as a mode of being that would restore value to the *existing* world. To recall once more Zarathustra’s exhortation to a crowd of townspeople, “The Superman is the meaning of the earth. . . . I conjure you, my brethren, *remain true to the earth*, and believe not those who speak unto you of superearthy hopes!” (Z, Prologue, 3, italics in original). But we should hesitate, I think, before reading “straight” Stevens’ citation of *Übermenschlichkeit*. Surely there is at least a degree of ironic play between the poem’s epigraph, which records Lemercier’s reflections on the potentially surprising form that “*la justice éternelle*” might take, and its title, “The Surprises of the Superhuman.” It would indeed be surprising if *Übermenschlichkeit*—a condition which embraces the idea of Heraclitean flux—became the conduit for anything “eternal.” While the irony at work in “The Surprises of the Superhuman” thus might well resolve in favour of *Übermenschlichkeit*, it

is surely important to acknowledge the tension between the poem and its epigraph. That Stevens himself omitted the epigraph to “The Surprises of the Superhuman” when he belatedly chose to include it in *Harmonium* does not diminish its relevance in critical approaches to the poem.

But there may be further problems with Leggett’s reading of “The Surprises of the Superhuman.” Can one really interpret Stevens’ “palais de justice of chambermaids” as a figure for the ideal? For the superficial, perhaps. For the banal, no doubt. But such a structure is hardly equatable to “the thought of Heaven,” however much it “tops the horizon with its colonnades.” Following Bates, I rather see the chambermaids’ court as shorthand for a bourgeois hierarchy of values. Again, Leggett understands the “palais de justice” to have been “*created*” (93) by the chambermaids as, seemingly, a kind of heavenly court of appeal which would at last hear their pleas and give them justice. I say, “seemingly,” because while Leggett’s identification of this horizon-topping court with the vision of Paradise which he charges so fascinates the woman of “Sunday Morning” would seem to require that the chambermaids envision their court as a place of otherworldly solace and redemption for themselves, he is not explicit on this point. And indeed the “palais de justice of chambermaids” could no less be the seat of aproned demi-gods casting judgement on the less-than-perfectly-starved lives of those around them.

And so one can read the chambermaids of “The Surprises of the Superhuman”: not as supplicants to their phantasmagorical “palais de justice,” but rather as the court itself. In their literal identity as servants dedicated to upholding the material values of their bourgeois masters or employers, Stevens’ maids are thus the antithesis of the *Übermensch* whose nature above all is to take to the nth degree, to make “superhuman,” what *Thus Spake Zarathustra* celebrates throughout its pages as the “creating agency” of the human. Indeed, at the heart of Zarathustra’s

attack on traditional mores is his conviction that this power has been lost, casually relinquished to the ease of living within a particular system of values. Though he concedes that the establishment of value systems is essential to the survival of civilizations— “No people could live without first valuing; if a people will maintain itself, however, it must not value as its neighbours valueth” (65)—he repeatedly urges his “brethren” to be as children in their “game of creating” (27), to “create beyond [them]selves” (37). Thus he exhorts his listeners,

Verily, men have given unto themselves all their good and bad. Verily, they took it not, they found it not, it came not unto them as a voice from heaven.

Values did man only assign to things in order to maintain himself—he created only the significance of things, a human significance! . . .

Valuing is creating: hear it, ye creating ones! Valuation itself is the treasure and the jewel of the valued things.

Through valuation only is there value; and without valuation the nut of existence would be hollow. Hear it, yet creating ones! (67)

In Stevens’ allowing us to find here an image of adjudicating chambermaids we have *par excellence* an ironic figure of judgement enslaved to public opinion, or focused on the most banal level of human experience, but in any case in no wise meriting the title of “ye creating ones!”

Where Leggett finds “The Surprises of the Superhuman” to reprise Nietzsche’s critique of idealism, his belief that “the concept ‘hereafter,’ ‘true world,’ [was] invented in order to devalue the only world there is—so as to leave no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality! (*Ecce Homo*, IV, 8), I read the poem rather as partaking in—but reservedly, as we shall see—the philosopher’s repeated assaults on the ignoble condition of “modern” man, and his corresponding

quest for a new nobility. Indeed, it seems just possible that Stevens's potentially adjudicating chambermaids owe something to Zarathustra's irrepressible clarifications to his "brethren" regarding the places in which this nobility will *not* reside:

Verily, not that ye have served a prince—of what account are princes  
now!—nor that ye have become a bulwark to that which standeth, that it may stand  
more firmly.

Not that your family have become courtly at courts, and that ye have  
learned—gay-coloured, like the flamingo—to stand long hours in shallow pools:

(For *ability-to-stand* is a merit in courtiers; and all courtiers believe that  
unto blessedness after death pertaineth—*permission-to-sit!*)

(III, lvi, 12, italics in original).

While hardly gay-coloured courtiers, Stevens' chambermaids-cum-judges might indeed be read as "bulwark[s] to that which standeth, that it may stand more firmly."

It must be admitted, however, that Stevens' final attitude to his maids—adjudicating or otherwise—is by no means unambiguous, thanks to a two-fold vagueness in pronoun reference ("it" in the third line, and "its" in the fifth) in the poem. If one understands "it"/ "its" to refer to "the palais de justice," then it is possible to read "The Surprises of the Superhuman" as, in fact, *ennobling* the chambermaids to the status of noble kings issuing "brave [if ineffectual] dicta." This reading finds the speaker imagining the "palais de justice of chambermaids" being "lost in *Übermenschlichkeit*"—after having been given its right and proper chance to correct, through its "brave dicta," "our faulty human things." But if this is the case, the designation of the chambermaids as *kings* seems an odd and unnecessary choice. It seems unlikely that the



exigencies of rhyme were such that the chambermaids could not have been designated more appropriately as *queens*. (“Scenes” could then perhaps have supplied the rhyme in the final line.) More importantly, however, such a reading renders the poem rather arch and trivializing: “those ‘brave’ regents, the chambermaids, have had their chance: bring on the *Übermensch!*,” Stevens seems to be saying—and it is possible, of course, that this is what he meant.

But it is also possible to understand “it”/ “its” to refer, not to the “palais de justice,” but rather to “our wretched state,” and such a reading finds Stevens engaged in a more mature—and informed—reflection on Nietzsche’s idea of *Übermenschlichkeit*. According to such a reading, “the palais de justice of chambermaids” becomes very much a figure of irony and one that is moreover by the poem’s end set adrift on the horizon like some slowly deflating balloon. To clarify, within such a reading, the noble kings of “our wretched state” have to this point stood in *opposition* to the “palais de justice,” endeavouring to counter its puerile judgements with “brave dicta” of their own. ( Just who these “kings” are remains obscure: they may, in fact, be rulers, but poets and philosophers and other creative sorts also seem possible candidates.) The abject failure of their noble intentions, however, which have, in fact, “somehow. . . / Ma[de] more awry our faulty human things,” is such that the speaker wonders if it might not be better to dispense with the whole notion of a human community struggling to evolve *en masse*, and to focus instead as sovereign individuals on becoming *Übermenschen*. A population of such resolutely independent creators and valuers would at the very least have the benefit of rendering obsolete the “palais de justice of chambermaids.”

While Stevens’ vision of noble kings being retired from service could well have been more or less original with him, or been inspired by some other source, that this scene of retirement

depends upon both the sorry existence of adjudicating chambermaids and the adoption of the doctrine of *Übermenschlichkeit* affords a striking parallel to Zarathustra's "Talk with the Kings" in Book IV of Nietzsche's prose poem. Going through the forests that surround his cave in search of the "higher men" whom he had earlier heard crying out in distress, Zarathustra is astonished to come across two kings (and one ass) and, "hiding hastily behind a thicket," overhears the following exchange as they sense his presence:

"That may perhaps be a goat-herd. Or an anchorite who hath lived too long among rocks and trees. For no society at all spoileth also good manners." [speaks the first king]

"Good manners?" replied angrily and bitterly the other king: "what then do we run out of the way of? Is it not 'good manners'? Our 'good society'?"

Better, verily, to live among anchorites and goat-herds, than with our gilded, false, over-rouged populace—though it call itself 'good society.'

—Though it call itself 'nobility.' But there all is false and foul, above all the blood—thanks to old evil diseases and worse curers.

....

Good manners!. . . No one knoweth any longer how to reverence: it is *that* precisely that we run away from. . . .

This loathing choketh me, that we kings ourselves have become false, draped and disguised with the old faded pomp of our ancestors, show-pieces for the stupidest, the craftiest, and whosoever at present trafficketh for power.

We *are not* the first men—and have nevertheless to *stand for* them: of this imposture have we at last become weary and disgusted.

From the rabble have we gone out of the way, from all those bawlers and scribe-blowflies, from the trader-stench, the ambition-fidgeting, the bad breath—: fie, to live among the rabble;

—Fie, to stand for the first men among rabble! Ah, loathing! Loathing! Loathing! What doth it now matter about us kings!”—.

(IV, lxiii, 1, italics in original)

Surprised and delighted by the nobility of spirit evinced by these two royals, Zarathustra welcomes them as honoured guests to his mountain cave, declaring himself “enchanted” by their forthright declaration that “There is no sorer misfortune in all human destiny, than when the mighty of the earth are not also the first men. Then everything becometh false and distorted and monstrous.” To recur to the language of Stevens’ poem, the kings themselves understand that as merely token rulers of such a “wretched state,” their “brave dictas” could *only* “make more awry our faulty human things.”

The tale that Stevens tells in “The Surprises of the Superhuman” of maidservants (those agents of “good manners” and “good society”), brave kings, and *Übermenschlichkeit* thus bears intriguing resemblances to Nietzsche’s tableau of kings recently come from the “gilded, false, over-rouged” society over which they once ruled, “draped and disguised with the old faded pomp of [their] ancestors,” to discover an admiring host in the cave-dwelling Zarathustra. That Stevens envisions *Übermenschlichkeit* specifically as a force that will release the world from the ignobly domesticated values of the bourgeoisie (symbolized by the “palais de justice of

chambermaids”) suggests that he was fairly well-informed about, and intrigued by, a Nietzschean vision of a “new nobility” that would be defined by its independently valuating spirit. That Stevens nonetheless felt a certain ambivalence toward the *Übermensch* may show, however, especially in the syntactical ambiguities which really do seem excessive in a poem as short as “The Surprises of the Superhuman.” As aforementioned, the ironies at work between the poem and its epigraph may likewise register a certain reserve on Stevens’ part. Finally, I would propose that the poet’s decision to rhyme “*Übermenschlichkeit*” with the platitudinous phrase, “soon come right,” is, at the very least, a tongue-in-cheek refusal to defer entirely to Nietzsche’s noble ideal. All this said, I believe “The Surprises of the Superhuman” to show Nietzsche’s ideas giving impetus to Stevens’ growing resistance to a malady of the imagination which continued to cherish old values for their beauty and their eloquence, unconscious of the fact that these were inadequate, or at least had to be strenuously revised, in a new dispensation which had violence as its governing principle. Such a malady of the imagination might well have been confirmed for Stevens in Lemercier’s letters which reveal an indefatigable faith in an “old table of values.”

\* \* \*

It is, then, I want to argue, Stevens’ own intuition that the imagination had to become more violent, more guttural in its engagement with reality, that may have led him to present his “common-man soldier” as a proto-modern poet trying on the Nietzschean for size—most overtly in “The Surprises of the Superhuman,” but also in “Common Soldier,” as we shall see. Before turning to consider the role of the Nietzschean in the original first poem of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” however, I would touch briefly on several other poems in the series which present

striking parallels with Nietzsche's critique of idealism and corresponding celebration of the creative and independently evaluating will. The first of these is the aforementioned third poem in the series, "Anecdotal Revery."

In her analysis, Coyle finds the poem to be about "a heroic figure who murders established, taken-for-granted ideas" who is in turn murdered by "ordinary, unthinking men" whose depiction reveals their "blind resistance to change," a thoroughly Nietzschean tableau (36-37). In fact, but for the abrupt slaying of the iconoclastic messenger in its final line, Stevens' poem could be summarized as a generally faithful adaptation of a scene in the prologue to *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In the blind townsfolk "tapping their way / By inches" we find an echo of the complacent, but also cautious, myopia of Zarathustra's first audience: "'We have discovered happiness'—say the last men, and blink thereby. . . . 'Formerly all the world was insane,' say the subtlest of them, and blink thereby" (12, 13).<sup>23</sup> In the man going "to complain to the grocer / Of yesterday's cheese," and in those taking a stroll or on their way to an assignation—dismissed as "crickets" one and all by their derisive antagonist—we find traces of Zarathustra's self-absorbed and trivial "last men." In Stevens' mayor-slayer we find, additionally, the figure of Nietzsche's prophet himself, bringing the news of the death of God into the world. But more generally, in the figure of the narrator who carries the mayor's "head / In the bag / Slung over [his] shoulder," and "secrets / That prick / Like a heart full of pins," and announces, "I . . . / am escaping from you / Get out of my way!," we have a version of the scene in which Zarathustra, fleeing the town which has turned against him, with the corpse of the rope-dancer on his back (the man to whom he had revealed the truth, "there is no devil or hell"),

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<sup>23</sup> Bates observes that in its presentation of "backward looking 'small people,'" "Anecdotal Revery" "may reflect [Stevens'] reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*" (251).

is warned by the buffoon: “Leave this town, O Zarathustra . . . there are too many here who hate thee” (*Z Prologue*).

But Stevens’ poem is its own creation as well, ratcheting up the violence to a pitch glimpsed only *in potentia* in Nietzsche’s text. At the midpoint of his prologue, Zarathustra tries to rouse the crowd of burghers from their complacent mediocrity:

Alas! There cometh the time when man will no longer launch the arrow of his  
longing beyond man—and the string of his bow will have unlearned to whizz!  
I tell you: one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell  
you: ye have still chaos in you. (ibid)

Silenced by their hostility Zarathustra observes, “And now do they look at me and laugh: and while they laugh they hate me too. There is ice in their laughter” (ibid). Thanks only to the good counsel of an otherwise malevolent “buffoon,” however, Zarathustra departs the town before its inhabitants have their chance to murder him as “a danger to the multitude” (ibid). The ostensible protagonist in “Anecdotal Revery” receives no such reprieve from his author, however, being struck down upon the instant of revealing his identity as a killer of mayors. I say “ostensible protagonist” because while Zarathustra is decidedly the hero of his story, the man in “Anecdotal Revery” is ambivalently drawn. While the blind burghers are hardly sympathetic, the protagonist seems, at least in part, a victim of his own myopia and self-absorption.

But, of course, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is not the only text hovering on the edge of Stevens’ poem—“Anecdotal Revery” is far more apparently a rebuke of Lemercier’s naive conception that “*Ce qu’il faut, c’est reconnaître l’amour et la beauté triomphante de toute violence.*” “Anecdotal Revery” seems to suggest, by contrast, that “Violence trumps all.” Yet

again, as one who would years later describe the imagination as “violence within responding to violence without,” Stevens was himself clearly committed to conceiving of a violence allied to beauty and love. Indeed, perhaps the speaker in “Anecdotal Revery” is more sympathetic than one might think. Whatever else one might say about the protagonist of “Anecdotal Revery,” he most certainly does have “chaos within”—to recur to Nietzsche’s image of self-surpassingly creative power—perhaps in his next life he will choose to “launch the arrow of his longing beyond man” rather than wield an angry hammer upon him. As Stevens would go on to observe in “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas,” chaos *should* give birth to freedom: “The law of chaos is the law of ideas / Of improvisation and seasons of belief.”

That Stevens himself was by the summer of 1917 considerably committed aesthetically and philosophically to “ideas / Of improvisation and seasons of belief” is the substance of Leggett’s thoughtful reading of Nietzschean affinity in “Negation,” the ninth poem in “Lettres d’un Soldat.” As James Longenbach points out in his overview of the poem, it reads as a “caustic rebuke”(60) of its chosen epigraph from one of Lemer cier’s letters, dated January 15, 1915. Here is the epigraph and poem in full:

*La seule sanction pour moi est ma conscience. Il faut nous confier à une justice impersonnelle, indépendante de tout facteur humain, et à une destinée utile et harmonieuse malgré toute horreur de forme.*

Hi! The creator too is blind,  
Struggling towards his harmonious whole,  
Rejecting intermediate parts,  
Horrors and falsities and wrong;

Incapable master of all force,  
Too vague idealist, overwhelmed  
By an afflatus that persists.  
For this, then, we endure brief lives,  
The evanescent symmetries  
From that meticulous potter's thumb.

The evident and compelling conjunctions between Lemercier's faith in an impersonal, but harmonious, justice, the explicit "Negation" of the poem's title, and its presentation of a fallible creator has generally led to the poem being read as a critique—Nietzschean and otherwise—of divine omnipotence.<sup>24</sup> Only Leggett, however, has sought to explicate this critique in Nietzschean terms—a perspective which certainly enriches our understanding of the poem.

As Leggett notes, Stevens' image of the creator as a "bungling potter" (102) shows striking affinity with Zarathustra's pronouncement against a similarly inept worker of clay: "Too much miscarried with him, this potter who had not learnt thoroughly! That he took revenge on his pots and creations, however, because they turned out badly—that was a sin against *good taste*" (IV, lxvi, italics in original). By Zarathustra's account, God compounds his "sinfulness" egregiously when he punishes his vessels for cracks and flaws that are in fact the consequence of his own artistic incompetence. As Leggett notes further, however, Stevens'

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<sup>24</sup> Margaret Peterson, for example, has interpreted the poem as a Jamesian interrogation, not of "the traditional God of Christian theology. . . [but] . . . the God of modern idealism. . . [for whom] the particulars of reality in their temporal existence are meaningless"(95). Litz, on the other hand, understandably asserts a strong debt to "The Rubáiyáat of Omar Khayyám" in Stevens' deficient "potter-God."



potter-God “differs slightly from Nietzsche’s portrait in that his fault lies not so much in his lack of skill as in his over-idealistic conception of what his creations should be” (102). For Leggett, then, “Negation” traverses some of the same philosophical ground as “Sunday Morning,” presenting the error of focusing on the ideal, as such will inevitably blind one to the worth of “the real.” Leggett is, I think, correct to read “Negation” as a Nietzschean critique of idealism. What he does not articulate as fully as he might, however, is the extent to which Stevens’ poem shows its speaker—that is, its common-soldier / poet persona—actively *celebrating*, and quite in the manner of Zarathustra, “the virtues of the real.”

That “Negation” is, notwithstanding its title, a poem of Nietzschean affirmation may be confirmed if we read it as a companion piece to the aforementioned poem “Anecdotal Revery” which presents God’s pots (that is, his human creations) in a decidedly unprepossessing light as blind to all but their most immediate needs (and as compelled to react most viscerally against perceived threats to these things). That the two poems *should* be read together is suggested by the rather arresting salutation that begins “Negation”: “Hi! The creator too is blind.” This opening gambit, otherwise puzzling because without immediate antecedent, makes sense if the blindness of the “creator” is referred back to the blindness of the townspeople in “Anecdotal Revery.” What the speaker of “Negation” (that is, Stevens’ common soldier-poet) appears to be suggesting by poem’s end is that *he*—unlike both the potter-God and his clay people—has clear sight: able to see both near and far. What the god of “Negation” irritably rejects as “Horrors, falsities, and wrongs” because he looks to see—and “too vague[ly],” at that—only the ideal, the speaker of “Negation” perceives and affirms as “evanescent symmetries.” In his clear-eyed recognition of the beauty of “intermediate parts,” Stevens’ soldier-poet might even be said to

possess something of the sanctity perceived in Zarathustra by the old anchorite whom Nietzsche's "wanderer" meets at the beginning of his tale: "Pure is his eye, and no loathing lurketh about his mouth" (Prologue 2).<sup>25</sup>

It is, perhaps, in further rebuke of Lemerrier's and Chevrillon's impenetrable faith in an enduring order of things that is *accessible* to us, their blindness to the fact that there can be, for us as finite creatures of thought, *only* "seasons of belief," as Nietzsche tells us in other words, that Stevens so pointedly changes the season of the soldier's death in the antepenultimate poem in the original manuscript of "Lettres d'un Soldat," later collected by Stevens as "The Death of a Soldier" in the second edition of *Harmonium*. Here is the poem in full, accompanied by its original epigraph from one of Lemerrier's letters dated March 5, 1915:

*La mort du soldat est près des choses naturelles.*

Life contracts and death is expected,

As in a season of autumn.

The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,

Imposing his separation,

Calling for pomp.

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<sup>25</sup> For an eloquent discussion of Nietzsche's "rhetoric of vision"—that is, his "rethink[ing] of the nature of vision and visibility"(20)—see Gary Shapiro's *Archaeologies of Vision*.

Death is absolute and without memorial,

As in a season of autumn,

When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,

The clouds go, nevertheless,

In their direction.

Placed last in the 1918 version of “Lettres d’un Soldat” in *Poetry*, “The Death of a Soldier” has been often read as an affirmation of Lemercier’s statement that “*La mort du soldat est près des choses naturelles*” (209).<sup>26</sup> For Lensing, for example, “Lemercier’s sentence encapsulates the poem” (209). Even more emphatic is Morse’s assessment that “the series reached its logical climax and conclusion with ‘The Death of a Soldier’; at least the two poems that followed completely lacked the poetic certainty of his deeply moving elegy” (49). Yet this is to presuppose the place of certainty in “Lettres d’un Soldat”—and, I believe, in “The Death of a Soldier” itself.

Its magisterial control of sense and syntax notwithstanding, I read “The Death of a Soldier” rather as a Nietzschean assertion of the “law of chaos,” or at least of a cataclysmic failure of *human* meaning, and as a heralding of the corresponding necessity to evolve a new “table of values,” to use Zarathustra’s phrase. In one of the more recent readings of the poem, Jahan Ramazani asserts that notwithstanding the poem’s own efforts to repudiate the elegiac,

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<sup>26</sup> Longenbach wisely observes “the trouble latent” in the word “près” (71). The death of a soldier is *almost* a natural thing.

“the pathetic alignment of the soldier’s death with nature’s [nonetheless] underlies much of the imagery” in “The Death of a Soldier” (577). Thus, for example, while the poet’s repeated use of the phrase “*As in a season of autumn*” (emphasis added) might seem to refuse the pathetic fallacy by emphasizing the relation between a soldier’s death and autumn as pure metaphor, Ramazani reminds us that “the autumnal setting, modestly offered as a thought-experiment, nevertheless returns the elegy to one of its traditional seasons” (577). Ramazani’s claim that the poem is an elegy is persuasive. At the same time, however, I would propose that to gain insight into how *Stevens* understood his autumnal poem, we need to take fuller account of his use of Lemercier’s reflection on “*la mort du soldat [étant] près des choses naturelles,*” a comment made on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, as Stevens’ poem is careful to affirm; that is, at the beginning of *spring*. Coming in the wake of “five days of horror” which left more than one thousand men dead and rotting on the battlefield, the soldier’s words attest to a frantic desire to reassert the ultimate meaningfulness of existence. Just prior to proclaiming the benevolent naturalness of the death of a soldier, Lemercier observes, “how harmonious death is in the ground, and how . . . genial it is to see the body returning to mother earth.” After affirming the “new life. . .with the earth” that the dead soldiers now experience, he closes with the counsel to his mother “to take refuge in the peace of spring.” Through all of Lemercier’s poignant musings from this period, then, there runs the desperate thread of effort to construct a narrative where so much violent death could harmonize with the coming of “peaceful” spring. In twice insisting that a soldier falls “*as in a season of autumn,*” to be covered by fallen and decaying leaves rather than crowned with flowers that will bloom as memorial and promissary note of resurrection, Stevens is asserting the law of cosmic chaos rather than one of harmony.

Following hard upon “The Death of a Soldier,” at least in Stevens’ original draft of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” came the further reversals and refusals of Poems XII and XIII, which were never titled, but which begin, respectively, “In a theatre, full of tragedy,” and “Death was a reaper with sickle and stone.” Both poems are decidedly rough, almost draft-like, notwithstanding the fact that Stevens evidently once thought them finished. Unlike other readers, who have judged these two final poems in “Lettres d’un Soldat” to reveal either Stevens’ waning interest in his subject, or his admission of imaginative inadequacy, I believe the inconclusiveness of Poem XII, and the stuttering enactment of failure in poem XIII, to have been purposeful and most appropriate to “Lettres d’un Soldat” itself, whose intent, at least in part, was to destroy, à la Nietzsche, an old system of imaginative values.<sup>27</sup> Momentarily deferring my reading of Poem XIII, I would propose the brief seeming fragment of Poem XII,

In a theatre, full of tragedy,  
 The stage becomes an atmosphere  
 Of seeping rose—banal machine  
 In appointed repertoire. . . ,

as a precise attack on symphonic orchestrations of value as opposed to single-string improvisation of belief. As Morse first pointed out, there existed an earlier Poem XII which, in comparison to the poem that Stevens would eventually show to Monroe, had a far less oblique relation to its epigraph: “*J’ai oublié de te dire que, l’autre fois, pendant la tempête, j’ai vu dans le soir les grues revenir. Une accalmie permettait d’entendre leur cri.*” Below is the earlier text:

The cranes return. The soldier hears their cry.

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<sup>27</sup> Morse suggests both a waning of enthusiasm and an admission of poetic inadequacy in the fragmentary nature of the last poems of “Lettres d’un Soldat.” (49)

No: not as if the jades of willow-tree  
Or river-fern came coloring the sky.  
But still the cranes return.

The soldier hears their cry. He knows the fire  
That touches them—knows that he must not know  
Nor burden his endurance with desire.  
But still the cranes return.

Endurance that grows heavy from despair,  
Drowsed with the oblivion of oblivions---  
The chant of spring becomes an obsolete air---  
But still the cranes return.

Grows heavy from despair, too much alone  
To feel the spring infusing its relief  
In sleepiness, to resist that weight of sky.  
But still the cranes return.

Morse supplies fascinating details about Stevens' attempts to edit this poem, so notably traditional in idiom and execution—at least in contrast to the poem he would eventually submit. The earlier poem is also striking in its fidelity to Lemercier's words. As MacLeod was the first to observe, the poems of "Lettres d'un Soldat" most often do not confine themselves to commenting, ironically or otherwise, on their attendant epigraphs, rather picking up on passages of similar resonance elsewhere in the soldier's letters. The earlier Poem XII is a case in point as it recurs with considerable poignancy to Lemercier's own reiterated self-counsel not to acknowledge his own hopes and desires lest these break his fragile self-control.

How then to explain the radical disjunction between this faithful testament to

Lemercier's harrowing experience, and the angry "outburst" that Stevens chose in its stead? The answer, I believe, was that Stevens judged both the measure and the matter of his first attempt to belong too much to the ritual consolations of the elegaic. Early in his letters, Lemercier recorded the leaving of the cranes in autumn; he was still alive in the spring when they returned, alive to hear their cries affirming their desire and the forceful desire of life itself. But he wasn't to live much longer and Stevens *knew* this. While it was understandable that the soldier should have found some comfort in seeing life return despite the brutal waste of his surroundings, at a certain point the poet must have recognized that *his* reiterations of "But still the cranes return" resolved things too easily, and that his duty as a modern poet was to refuse the "appointed repertoires" of and for the "tragic." He had to propose a new stage, a new script, and above all, a new actor, or "act of the mind," that "ha[d] to be living, to learn the speech of the place, / . . .to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time" ("Of Modern Poetry," 7-9). In the final section of this chapter, I examine the first and tenth poems of "Lettres d'un Soldat"—the aforementioned "Common Soldier" and the untitled and uncollected "John Smith, and his son, John Smith"—as together foreshadowing Stevens' modern creator of "capable imagination" ("Mrs. Alfred Uruguay"). As I read it, this "common soldier" is Nietzschean in his valiant determination to think for himself, refusing, like Zarathustra, to "build [his] tabernacle" amongst those who advocate or believe that we "have only one choice: either to become evil beasts, or evil-beast-tamers"(III, lv, 2). But he is, at the same time, *not*-Nietzschean in that his "arrow of longing" is not "launched. . . beyond man," but is rather clearly projected to fall among them, in all their "earthy implications."

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that we might understand Stevens'

“common soldier” as rebuking Chevrillon’s dangerously high-flying rhetoric, but also as resisting Nietzsche’s rejection of the “common man”—even as he lays claim to a Nietzschean will to creative power. Having earlier invoked Hindu *Kshettyras* (warriors) to eulogize Lemerrier, Chevrillon turns to the “common soldier” for a closing rhapsody about the “sublime message [being] sent to us from the front,” a message he evidently found distilled in Lemerrier’s letters:

In all [Lemerrier’s] comrades assembled for the great task, he too had recognized the best and the deepest things that his own heart held, and so he speaks of them constantly—especially of the *simplest* of the men—with so great respect and love. Far from ordinary ambitions and cares, the things that this rough life among eternities brings into all hearts with a heretofore unknown amplitude are serenity of conscience and a freshness of feeling in perpetual touch with the harmonies of nature. These men do but reflect nature. Since they have renounced themselves and given themselves, all things have become simple for them. They have the transparence of soul and the lights of childhood. . . . This new youthfulness of heart under the contemned menace of death, this innocence in the daily fulfilment of heroic duty, is assured by a spiritual state akin to sanctity. (29, italics added)

Here, as in his earlier rhapsody on the *Kshettyras*, which again forms the opening epigraph to “Lettres d’un Soldat,” Chevrillon’s deployment of “simplicity” is rhetorically charged. Just as in the earlier passage it had been “plainly”—*simplement*—Arjuna’s duty to go into battle, so here are we told that “all things have become simple” for the common soldier. One could argue that Chevrillon’s closing patriotic effusion *depends* on casting soldiers as “simple,” as



childlike—that he can only reach these rhetorical heights by denying his soldier’s doubt, anxiety, fear, and cynicism.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear that in such appalling sophistry, Nietzsche would have had no part. Indeed, his attack on the “state. . . [as] coldest of all cold monsters” in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* contains what might be read as an explicit warning to his “brethren” to steer clear of just such men as Chevrillon: “Destroyers, are they who lay snares for many, and call it the state: they hang a sword and a hundred cravings over them” (I. xi).<sup>28</sup> Yet Nietzsche himself had decidedly little use for Chevrillon’s man of “ordinary ambitions and cares”: the very word “ordinary” would have been anathema to him, synonymous with mediocrity and conformity. To recall Olivia Schutte’s observation on this question, while Nietzsche did intermittently exhibit a certain “protective paternalism toward the masses. . . . [He] was also motivated to support a narrow elitism on account of his contempt for the values of the masses” (149). “Many too many are born: for the superfluous ones was the state devised!” (I xi).

In highlighting Nietzsche’s contempt for the “common man,” I am thinking, however, particularly of his assault on this figure of “the last man” in the Prologue of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* where Zarathustra mocks those who “have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night” (5). Nietzsche pinned his creative and philosophical hopes on the exceptional man, and saw his average neighbour as profoundly threatening. In a note from 1884, he observes that “the masses, the miserable, and the most unfortunate concern me little—the *first and most splendid* types [concern me], and that *out of consideration for the ill-bred* (i.e., the

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<sup>28</sup> Chevrillon’s *England at War (1914-1915)* shows a typically chauvinistic ignorance of Nietzsche’s thought. At one point, the author links “the diabolical Nietzschean creed” (46) with “the Prussian theory of the Absolute State” (53).

masses) they *do not come off badly*” (italic in original).<sup>29</sup> It is, I propose, in his particular figuration as a “*common soldier*”—that is, as an unexceptional man of “ordinary ambitions and cares” but also of critical intellect who can be read as laying claim to be a Nietzschean “warrior of knowledge” (*TSZ I, x*)—that Stevens’ soldier / poet of “Lettres d’un Soldat” addresses himself not just to the dangerous platitudes of such as Chevrillon, but also to the promise—and what he saw as the perils—of the Nietzschean will to create.

In mid-March, 1918, Stevens met Harriet Monroe and “weeded out the bad ones” from his draft of “Lettres d’un Soldat.” According to Lensing, Stevens himself recommended the removal of “Common Soldier,” and it has since remained uncollected and largely unread except by readers of the original draft of “Lettres d’un Soldat.” Here is the poem in full, complete with its epigraph from a letter by Lemercier, one of the earliest, dated September 7, 1914:

*. . . Nous sommes embarqués dans l’aventure, sans aucune sensation dominante,  
sauf peut-être une acceptation assez belle de la fatalité. . .*

No introspective chaos . . . I accept:

War, too, although I do not understand.

And that, then, is my final aphorism.

I have been pupil under bishops’ rods

And got my learning from the orthodox.

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<sup>29</sup> Qtd in Schutte, 156. The square brackets added are hers. It is worth noting that Nietzsche’s disdain for the “ill-bred” masses by no means included members of the peasant class. At one point in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* he declares the peasant to belong in his coarse health, endurance, and “artfulness” to “the noblest tribe.” For the unexceptional man of Main Street, however, Nietzsche had only vitriol.

I mark the virtue of the common-place.

I take all things as stated—so and so.

Of men and earth: I quote the line and page,

I quote the very phrase my masters used.

If I should fall, as soldier, I know well

The final pulse of blood from this good heart

Would taste, precisely, as they said it would.

On first reading, and perhaps many subsequent, Stevens' "common soldier" might seem the quintessence of passive obedience—of the proverbial lamb going to slaughter. After all, each of the poem's four stanzas contains an explicit reiteration of the soldier's opening claim that there is "no introspective chaos" within him. Stanza II is a dilated summary of the soldier's having been like wax under the impress of various educational forces—bishops' rods, the orthodox, the commonplace. Stanza III gives tri-fold assurances that he is no independent critic of life but rather "take[s] all things as stated," passively quoting "the very phrase[s] [his] masters used." The final stanza of the poem finds the "common soldier" apparently so persuaded of the sagacity of these aforementioned masters that he insists that "should [he] fall" his blood will "taste, precisely, as they said it would." In its opening phrase, readers may hear echoes of the first line from Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier": "If I should die, think only this of me."

"The Common Soldier" would thus seem little more than a drab redaction of its epigraph from Lemerrier's letter of September 7. Where the young Frenchman relates his lack of any

dominant sensation, “except perhaps a beautiful enough acceptance of fate,” as he and his companion soldiers are moved by train towards the front, Stevens’ “common soldier” himself seems not so much tranquil in the face of fate, as supine. Yet to read Lemercier’s letters themselves is to discover that the French soldier’s claim to equanimity, which Stevens reproduces in his poem, was hardly representative of his state of mind on that September day, being merely the first line of a letter which in its fullness reveals the soldier’s considerable distress as he observes “the fleeing civilians. Poor souls, true exiles, or rather dead leaves flying before the whirlwind.” Lemercier’s letter concludes,

Among these waifs of war an old woman touched me to the heart. She was a grandmother of eighty-seven, shaken and bruised by the jolts of the cars, by turns put down from and put back into these rolling cages; now trembling, now seemingly abandoned, and her head fairly swimming in the midst of it all.

A similar transcript of a mind swerving between excitement and dread is found in Lemercier’s preceding letter of September 5, which finds him speaking of “horrible nights,” the “monster” of war, and “this present horror” even as he records his synaesthetic reverence for the “sonorous and noble shores” of the Loire and his awakening to “all that is filial and profound in the bonds which binds [him] to [his] native country.” Stevens seems thus to scant the complex range of Lemercier’s emotions as he moved toward the front line.

Yet the American poet may, in fact, have been truer to the French soldier’s memory than it at first appears. My evidence for this is truly minuscule, but nonetheless significant: namely, the ellipsis within which Stevens chose to frame Lemercier’s words when he used them to introduce “Common Soldier.” Here again, is the epigraph in question: “. . . *Nous sommes embarqués dan l’aventure, san aucune sensation dominante, sauf peut-être une acceptation assez*

*belle de la fatalité. . . .*” We should not, I think, ignore Stevens’ precise typography here: none of the other epigraphs in “Lettres d’un Soldat” is framed in this way. Taken in itself, the closing ellipsis might be explained easily enough as denoting, in standard fashion, omitted material. (We find Stevens deploying the ellipsis to just this end *within* the epigraphs that precede poems VIII and XIII in the series.) And, indeed, the closing ellipsis in Stevens’ epigraph for “Common Soldier” does omit a substantial portion of the sentence from which it came. In full, this sentence reads, “We have embarked on the great adventure without any dominant sensation unless it be a rather fine acceptance of fatality—but our sensibility is kept ever on the alert by the sight of the victims, especially by the fleeing civilians.” This is no small excision. Lemercier goes on to speak with considerable distress of watching his countrymen crammed into trains like livestock: “these poor, desolated, up-rooted beings suddenly fallen to the level of dumb, driven cattle.” Why did Stevens make so free with Lemercier’s text?

While explicating authorial intention on the basis of a few well-placed dots may seem a rather tendentious manœuvre, I would propose that something of a reason for Stevens’ selective citation may be found in the ellipsis which he deploys in *advance* of Lemercier’s words. Again, there might be several possible explanations for this punctuation mark. Stevens may have wished to commemorate in some form from the outset that his poem sequence intersects *Lettres d’un Soldat* in something of *medias res*, rather than at the beginning. If this were the case, however, one might expect the epigraph to the final poem in manuscript (XIII “Death was a reaper”) to conclude with a parallel ellipsis, signaling Stevens’ exit, at it were, from Lemercier’s letters. That Stevens was not merely wishing to flag the fact that he was quoting from the opening lines of a particular letter is confirmed by the fact that the epigraphs from poems IV and XIII are not prefaced by ellipsis even though these, like the epigraph to “Common Soldier,” are taken from the

opening lines of a letter.

What then did Stevens mean in framing the epigraph to “Common Soldier” in ellipsis? Something of an answer may be found in Lentricchia’s comment on the ellipsis with which Stevens affirms the expulsion from heaven of “us and our images” in the first canto of “It Must Be Abstract”: “The ellipsis: not words left out, but words impossible” (*Ariel* 13). That is, the seven dots which frame “Common Soldier” mark not a bibliographical omission, but a psychic or emotional repression: “not words left out, but words impossible.” As I note above, Lemercier’s claim to serenity comes in the middle of revelations of his feelings of dread. While his letter from September 7 begins by asserting the war as an “adventure” after the manner of Brooke, it ends with thoughts on “the waifs of war.” What remains, therefore, commemorated but unspoken in the ellipsis which bracket Stevens’ epigraph are Lemercier’s own moments of “*introspective chaos*.”

My use of Stevens’ opening phrase from “Common Soldier” to describe what in fact *was* Lemercier’s mental state as he moved across France to the frontlines is deliberate. I began my discussion of “Common Soldier” by emphasizing the ways in which this first poem of “Lettres d’un Soldat” suggests a persona nearly supine in its deference to authority. That we might have reason to suspect an ironic undertow in this soldier’s protestations of obedience, however, may show itself even in his seemingly most straightforward assertion of passivity: “No introspective chaos. . . I accept.” That is, the prominent ellipsis in the first proper line of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” which might seem, at first, to reinforce the passivity of Steven’s “common soldier,” may rather be read in a quite literal sense as *spanning* an abyss of chaotic thought and feeling—a psychic confusion simultaneously confessed and repressed by Lemercier. In sum, I believe that the ellipsis in the first line of “Common Soldier” can be read as a space of strained silence and omission in parallel with the chaos marked by Stevens’ elliptical deployment of Lemercier’s own words in his

epigraph.

In suggesting that the “common soldier” may, indeed, feel considerable—and obstinately creative—“chaos” within, I dissent from MacLeod’s assessment that we find Stevens here reproducing Lemercier’s “unquestioning” idealism before battle: “he is naive enough to assert his inner strength in the form of a final aphorism” (51). Indeed, I believe this “final aphorism” to rather hint at a significant critical intelligence which will, in fact, show itself forcefully in the final stanza of “Common Soldier.” As Stevens’ soldier tells us in the opening moment of his poem, he “accepts” war. But as he is then swift to observe, he does not *understand* it, and in his refusal to grant war—and those who would dictate its meaning and value—the capitulation of his intelligence, his resistant imagination reveals itself. To be clear, it is the soldier’s insistence that war is incomprehensible that attests to his fundamental, and intelligent, rebelliousness. He has no choice but to fight. It matters to no one save himself that he “does not understand,” but he insists upon this point nonetheless and so clears for himself a significant space of intellectual integrity. Indeed, that this “common-soldier” will meditate at length on his experience of war, that is, as the unifying consciousness of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” suggests him as one who, contrary to his own expressed predilection to “take all things as stated,” in fact “liveth in order to know,” to recur to one of Zarathustra’s earliest formulations of the *Übermensch*. (Prologue 4). Like Zarathustra, Stevens’ “common soldier” might be heard to say, albeit by indirection, “wage war. . . for the sake of your thoughts!” (Z I. x).

Admittedly, the second and third stanzas of the poem might seem to pose something of an obstacle to my argument for an empowered “common soldier.” What to make of such fulsome descriptions of deference to all manner of authority? One possible answer is that the soldier’s litany of obediences, running the gamut from orthodoxy to “the virtue[s] of the common-place,”

is *meant* to be excessive. That is, the degree of inflation in the soldier's seeming ode to the wisdom of his "masters" is proportionate to the speed and (quiet) savagery with which he then punctures this purported sagacity in the final stanza of his eponymous poem.

That we should read the final stanza of "Common Soldier" as a rebuke of past masters, is, I think, undeniable. In its opening statement, "If I should fall, as soldier, I know well," we should no doubt hear an echo of Brooke's "The Soldier": "If I should die, think only this of me." Yet Stevens' "common soldier" is by no means simply cribbing from "Master" Brooke. Where Brooke exhorts his readers to imagine that, in death,

[his] heart, all evil shed away, [will as]  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Giv[e] somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day,

Stevens' "common soldier" foretells quite another end for *his* "good heart." Where Brooke projects *some* kind of ethereal reconciliation of his spirit into a community of "hearts at peace, under an English heaven," our "man of the line" notes only that "the final pulse" of his heart's blood, welling up into his mouth as his body, blasted by a shell or skewered by a bayonet, disintegrates fast or slowly into "some corner of a foreign field," will "taste, precisely, as they said it would." It is difficult to imagine a lonelier, and more useless, affirmation in the moment of death than this "precise" physiological fact.

It is against such meaningless precision and empty certainty that the soldier's opening declaration of incomprehension in the face of war shows resistant intelligence. That in the soldier's intelligent resistance we may find trace of the Nietzschean creative will, and indeed even of Stevens' early receptive reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, is suggested in the poem's linkage of



aphorism, blood, and self-knowledge. That Nietzsche took delight in an aphoristic style hardly needs saying, but Stevens' own *Adagia* and *Materia Poetica* reveal the poet likewise held the aphorism in high esteem. As Coyle reminds us, Stevens seems to have regarded the aphorism as “an anchorage for thought” (*L* 27), and so, pace MacLeod, I read the “final aphorism” of Stevens’ “common soldier” as marking not naive idealism, but rather a visceral understanding rooted in experience.<sup>30</sup> Early in the first book of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, its hero observes, “Of all that is written, I love only what person hath written with his blood” (“Of Reading and Writing”). A few lines further on he declares, “He that writeth in blood and proverbs [*Sprüche*: also translatable as aphorism] doth not want to be read, but learnt by heart.” At risk of imposing a coherence on the poem that it cannot sustain, I would suggest that in “Common Soldier” we find trace of Nietzsche’s critique of “reading idlers”: those parasites or otherwise weak spirits who “take all things as stated—so and so / Of men and earth” rather than discovering the “bloody” truth for themselves. While Stevens’ “common soldier” seems at pains to identify himself as just such a passive creature, his very last breath falling into line behind “the line and page . . . the very phrase [his] masters used,” he ultimately shows the bitter emptiness of his formal education. What Stevens’ “common soldier” has “learnt by heart” and would pass on to his fellow soldiers through a “final aphorism” is that while as “men of the [front] line, their bodies may be forced to “accept” war, if they will become like him, a “[modern] man of the [poetic] line”—that is, a man using his will-to-creative power—their minds will refuse such capitulation.

It is in keeping with this refusal to “comprehend” war that Stevens’ “common soldier” will in the final lines of “Lettres d’un Soldat” interrogate poetic representations of death and, finding

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<sup>30</sup> Oddly enough, however, though Coyle examines “Lettres d’un Soldat,” she makes no mention of the explicit allusion to aphorism in “Common Soldier.”

them wanting, lapse into a stuttering silence. Prefaced by a comment from Lemercier on the way in which soldiers detailed to repair the trenches regularly dug up corpses, the final extant poem in the series first finds the common soldier—more fully taking on the mantle of poet here than at any other point in “Lettres d’un Soldat”—reviewing two standard images for “the truth of Death” (9). First up is the iconic image of death as “a reaper with sickle and stone, / Or swipling flail” (1-2), followed by a figure of death as (perhaps) one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, “beating his horse, / Gesturing grandiose things in the air, / Seen by a muse” (4-6). Thoroughly unimpressed by these shades of old Masters, the soldier dismisses them as “[s]ymbols of sentiment . . .”(10, ellipsis in original). He then does try to articulate a new way of speaking of the violence he has witnessed : “Take this phrase, / Men of the line, take this new phrase / On the truth of Death—” Strikingly, however, he concludes by asserting the knowledge of the *other* men of the line—“*You* know the phrase” (emphasis added).

It is in this final gesture of deference to the experience of an amorphous group of other soldiers that I read Stevens’ “common soldier” and Stevens himself as departing critically from a strictly Nietzschean formulation of creative will. Here we find traces of the poet’s paradoxical attitude towards the general, the common. As Bates has observed, crucial in the genealogy of Stevens’ hero of the imagination is a “Chaplinesque figure [who] stands for the mass of humanity . . . [and] as such . . . balks the dreams of those . . . who long to surpass the human condition” and so does the “commonal” in Stevens have its “pathetic dimension” (218). But as Bates goes on to say, the commons are also “heroic” in Stevens: “magnify[ing] us in our own eyes by fashioning credible fictions of nobility” (ibid.) For Nietzsche, by contrast, the hero and the commons were simply antithetical.

It is my contention that “Lettres d’un Soldat” shows Stevens beginning to formulate his

theory of the valiant imagination which would eventually place the spirit of the commons at the centre of things That his interest in a Nietzschean creative will-to-power thus did not involve a concomitant disdain for the imaginative resources of the common is made apparent in the tenth poem of “Lettres d’un Soldat”: in the untitled, never collected, and rarely commented upon text which begins “John Smith, and his son, John Smith.” That Stevens would have chosen (in the company of Monroe) to retain “John Smith, and his son, John Smith” for the 1918 issue of *Poetry* initially surprises. On first reading, the poem seems too slight for serious consideration. Here it is in full:

John Smith and his son, John Smith,  
    And his son’s son John, and-a-one  
    And-a-two and-a-three  
And-a-rum-tum-tum, and-a  
Lean John, and his son, lean John,  
    And his lean son’s John, and-a-one  
    And-a-two and-a-three  
And-a-drum-rum-rum, and-a  
Rich John, and his son, rich John,  
    And his rich son’s John, and-a-one  
    And-a-two and-a-three  
And-a-pom-pom-pom, and-a  
Wise John, and his son, wise John,  
    And his wise son’s John, and-a-one  
    And-a-two and-a-three

And-a-fee and-a-fee and a-fee

And-a-fee-fo-fum---

Voilà la vie, la vie, la vie,

And-a-rummy-tummy-tum

And-a-rummy-tummy-tum.

Some critics have enjoyed the poem for its energy, and seen it as quite in keeping with its epigraph (from a letter dated February 4, 1915) which reads “*Hier soir, rentrant dans ma grange, ivresse, rixes, cris, chants et hurlements. Voilà la vie!*” Morse, for example, reads the poem as an “effervescent jest to illustrate [Lemercier’s observation]” (47). But Morse’s implication that Lemercier had greeted the revels of his men with equanimity is not borne out by the rest of the soldier’s letter. Lemercier was, in fact, distinctly put out by all the drunkenness and noise and speaks of taking refuge outside the barn with “[his] friend the moon and majestic night retiring before the morning, which took pity on me.” At the same time, however, it must be said that the irritable anger thus contained in the phrase, “Voilà la vie!”, was unprecedented and never repeated, but above all was hardly representative of his attitude to the “common soldier.” While Lemercier several times intimates his unhappiness at having to live in proximity with men clearly not habitués of Parisian drawing rooms, in general his comments are praiseful, several times showing humble admiration for their courage and resilience. Stevens’ bizarre riffing on the soldier’s sole expression of ill-temper seems thus at first only pointlessly disrespectful of Lemercier’s memory.

But as the twelve-fold iteration of the decidedly generic but evidently Anglo-Saxon/American name John (Smith) makes clear, this poem’s soldiers, descending one from

another in a sequence that recalls the begats of Genesis—but to the decidedly non-liturgical beat of a child’s nursery rhyme—are not figures for Lemercier’s brave compatriots. Indeed, the gaiety of the diction marching through the poem, ringing the changes on the giant’s chant in “Jack and the Beanstalk,” suggests that these John Smiths are perhaps not soldiers at all, or at least not ones destined for slaughter on the battle field. Though these hardly yet seem kin to Zarathustra’s “warriors of knowledge” who wage war “for the sake of [their] thoughts” (I, x), they are at least animated by a buoyancy of spirit that Nietzsche would commend. As the poem states, “*Voilà la vie, la vie, la vie.*”

Coming near the end of a rather repetitious poem, and sandwiched between “And-a-fee-fo-fum—” and “And-a-rummy-tummy-tum,” this celebration by Stevens’ “common soldier” of life *en français* is easy to pass over. But the line should perhaps give us pause, as it is the sole instance in “Lettres d’un Soldat” of a full phrase from Lemercier’s letters being rendered complete as a line of Stevens’ verse. (The poet does, of course, excerpt three other words from Lemercier’s letters in his poem series: “justice,” “beauté,” and “chère,” but there is particular force behind this inclusion of a full phrase.) There is considerable poignancy in the fact that “Voilà la vie!” should be the single line both Lemercier’s letters and “Lettres d’un Soldat” share. But of greatest interest to me at this juncture is the way in which the airy labials of “Voilà la vie, la vie, la vie,” skipping suddenly through the “fo-fum” and “rummy-tummy-tum” evolution of the Anglo-Saxon—and therefore gutturally Germanic—John Smith, recalls the linguistic preoccupations of the previously discussed “Plot Against the Giant” and “Explanation.” In a striking departure from these other giant poems of 1917, however, French and German (or rather, Germanic) appear on an almost equal footing here: that is, while the *actual* power of life/reality is, as in the other poems, in some sense represented as Germanic, through the generations of John Smith succeeding on into infinity,

this power is *described* in French. To put it another way, in “Lettres d’un Soldat” French is, at the last, found to be equal to the task of presenting “guttural” reality.

That this should be the case in a poem otherwise devoted—or so I have argued—to interrogating the imaginative powers of the French as ineffectual is striking. Perhaps the poet meant his final inclusion of Lemercier’s words within “John Smith” as a kind of redress. I would suggest furthermore, however, that the suddenly explicit interplay between French and the Anglo-Saxon / Germanic in the poem may signal, as I suggest above, that it is not about soldiers at all, but rather is a projection about a present, but especially future, imaginative power. With his “fee-fo-fum,” John Smith might be numbered among the giants of *Harmonium* (although of course, only as a suppressed presence, as Stevens did not include the poem there). Yet John Smith is not the anonymous ogre of “The Plot Against the Giant,” nor is he that more abstract figuration of the giant Germanic imagination which appears in “Explanation.” Rather, he is, as his seeming generic name would affirm, the gigantic quintessence of the common-place man.

But then again, this John Smith may not be quite as “generic” as he first appears, being perhaps as well an allusion to the Captain John Smith of American history and literary legend. Though most commonly recalled in romantic (and romanticized) conjunction with Pocahontas, Captain Smith was also the brave, resourceful, and decidedly anti-authoritarian leader, if not actual first founder, of Jamestown, Virginia. Founded in 1607 as the first English colony in the “New World,” Jamestown might well have failed had it not been for the vigorous labours of Smith.<sup>31</sup> That there may be shades of *this* John Smith appearing near the end of “Lettres d’un Soldat” suggests that Stevens’ first formulations of a New World hero of the imagination may

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<sup>31</sup> See *The Life of Captain John Smith, The Founder of Virginia*. (1867) Ed. William Gilman Simms.

have had a consciously American aspect, foreshadowing his mature efforts to write poems of his climate, poems of the American “New World.” Critically, any allusion to the good Captain would also lend substance to Stevens’ articulation of the evolution of his giant in material terms: from lean to rich to wise. While Captain Smith, as the son of a well-to-do yeoman farmer, was not himself from the impoverished classes, his copious writings on his experience in the New World attracted many “leaner” sorts who came to New England determined to acquire all the riches that might be had “by labour, and diligence.”<sup>32</sup>

In concluding, I would propose this seemingly slight poem late in “Lettres d’un Soldat” as a critical early moment in Stevens’ own efforts to “conjecture” his “supreme fiction” as a “violence from within responding to a violence without.” Here it finds primordial shape close to “the meaning of the earth,” to recur to one of Nietzsche’s descriptions of his *Übermensch* in the opening pages of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Stevens’ “John Smiths” are powerful giants with the evident capacity to evolve: growing over the course of the poem from lean, to rich, to wise. And they inhabit the stuff of poetry: if only in the guise of a child’s nursery rhyme. But they do not yet speak for themselves, as men of the “[poetic] line.” Stevens, through Lemercier, speaks for them: “*Voilà la vie, la vie. la vie.*” But most critically, they are not *Übermenschen*, although something of their nature may grow out of a productive engagement with the idea of Nietzsche’s supermen. In their evident generative (if not artistically creative) power, especially in Stevens’ deliberate linkage of this power to a child’s rhyme, they may well carry something of Nietzsche’s blissfully creating child in them.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, these giant-children have nothing in them of the “transparence

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<sup>32</sup> See Smith’s *The Generall Historie of Virginia*, Volume II , 16.

<sup>33</sup> In the opening pages of Book I of his narrative, Zarathustra presents the three-fold metamorphoses of the human spirit from the “load-bearing” camel, to the nay-saying lion, to the

of soul and the lights of childhood . . . . innocence in the daily fulfilment of heroic duty” celebrated by Chevrillon. Stevens may well have composed “John Smith” as part of his “outburst” against the likes of this French man of letters. They are still not *Übermenschen*, however, most particularly because they are men of flesh, a vulnerable condition of earthliness which will be reinforced by “The Death of a Soldier,” which immediately followed “John Smith” in both the original manuscript and 1918 version of “Lettres d’un Soldat.” While Stevens’ soldier-giants of the imagination may therefore be, at this early juncture, distant kin to the resourceful and rebellious John Smith of American history, they are much more apparently kin to the “Big-bellied ogres curled up in the sunlight, / Stuttering dreams. . .” to whom the poet whimsically refers in the uncollected “Inscription for a Monument” from 1916. Lacking eloquence and rather indolent they are unlikely to be galvanized by Zarathustra’s exhortation to rise and surpass themselves, but their evident love for sunlight suggests their author might have yet at least heard of Nietzsche’s prophet of a new day.

Many years later in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens would describe a statue of Andrew Jackson on horseback in Lafayette Square in Washington, the horse “with one of the most beautiful tails in the world,” the rider “raising his hat in a gay gesture saluting the ladies of his generation,” and observe, “One looks at this work of Clark Mills and thinks of the remark by Bertrand Russell that to acquire immunity to eloquence is of the utmost importance to the citizens of a democracy” (*CPP* 648). It is in this context that Stevens, following Coleridge, then dismisses the statue of Jackson as merely a work of “fancy,” partaking “neither of the imagination nor of reality” (648). Against such public statuary which, according to Stevens, revealed the sorry

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child. Of this ultimate figure of free-spiritedness he writes, “Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea.”



extent to which “the American will as a principle of the mind’s being is easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself,” the poet would oppose with palpable relief and delight, the “ribald and hilarious reality” imagined in Reginald Marsh’s painting of carousel riders, “Wooden Horses” (648, 649).

For Stevens, André Chevrillon was doubtless a latter-day Clark Mills. Nietzsche most certainly was not. The poet’s invocation of *Übermenschlichkeit*, however hypothetical, alone reveals that he knew enough about the philosopher to sense something of value on the horizon. In whatever he knew of Zarathustra’s excoriations of “old values” and postulations of radically new ones, Stevens must have recognized a genuine prophet of and guide for “the mind’s being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself.” In claiming that Stevens felt antagonism towards Chevrillon as a bellicose rhetorician of the Old World, I do not mean to assert the American poet as a latter-day Wilfred Owen.<sup>34</sup> The First World War was always for Stevens something of an abstraction, an event which he later articulated, as we have seen, in terms of its catalyzing effect on the imagination.<sup>35</sup> As he observed in “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” “Those who seek for the freshness and strangeness of poetry in fresh and strange places do so because of an intense need” (CPP 791). It is difficult to read Lemercier’s letters and not envision a man in greater need of the “fresh and strange,” and yet, unsurprisingly, he did not seek for novelty, but found solace in his accustomed haunts of poetic mediation of the world’s beauties—and horrors. It was, I have argued, in the process of theorizing the war’s effect on the imaginations of sensitive souls *like*

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<sup>34</sup> Owen had men like Chevrillon in mind when he excoriated those who “tell with such high zest. . . The old lie; Dulce et Decorum est / Pro patria mori.”

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, his apology to Harriet Monroe on April 8, 1918, for his insensitive “gossip about death” when for “too many people in the world, vitally involved. . . it is infinitely more than a thing to think of” (L 206).

Lemercier's—rather than upon Lemercier himself— that Stevens took his first, ambivalent, step towards a projected Nietzschean “warrior of the imagination” who was above all things to be “true to the meaning of the earth” and turn his back on all forms of “starry *connaissance*.” For Stevens, in such rootedness lay the imagination's renewed health and salvation. But as “Lettres d'un Soldat” suggests and “The Comedian as the Letter C” confirms, or so I will argue, in my fifth chapter, Stevens was wary of whatever shadow of that Germanic giant, the *Urbarmensch*, he perceived on his imaginative horizon. In this chapter I have argued that “Lettres d'un Soldat, (1914-1915)” shows Stevens attracted to the Nietzschean celebration of the creative will of men, but troubled by the ways in which that celebration explicitly denied such creative power to most of humanity. In the following chapter, I read “Sunday Morning,” “The Snow Man” and “Earthy Anecdote” as engaging critically with a Nietzschean perspective on “*der Sinn der Erde*”—“the meaning of the earth.” That is, while arguably expressing the ecstatic feeling of “April-weather” in the midst of January snows that Nietzsche insisted should attend our power to bravely create out of the void, these poems at the same time foreground the humbling meaningfulness of the earth's dark cold.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, “Preface to the Second Edition,” vii.

Chapter IV: On Be(hold)ing the Meaning of the Earth in New England.

“Let your bestowing love and your knowledge be devoted to be the meaning of the earth! [ . . . ] that it may give to the earth its meaning, a human meaning!”

(Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*)

One must have a mind of winter / [ . . . ] To behold [ . . . ] / [ . . . ] the nothing that is.

(Stevens, “The Snow Man”)

Speaking before the English Institute at Columbia in 1948, Stevens observed that “the great poems of heaven and hell [having] been written . . . the great poem of the earth. . . will constitute the true prize of the spirit” (*CPP* 730). He did not on this occasion—or any other—programmatically delineate the nature of this “great poem” to come. Even so, to read the *Collected Poems* of Wallace Stevens is to encounter something very like a “great poem of the earth,” in the sense of a deeply coherent work whose imaginative—and emotional—centre of gravity *is* the earth. This concentration on “the earth”—that is, not just precisely observed natural phenomena, but quotidian and domestic detail as well—in part stems from a sense of religious loss. In his early study of twentieth-century poetry, *Poets of Reality*, J. Hillis Miller declares that the “vanishing of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens’ thought and poetry” (218). As desolate as it sounds, this radical loss of locus for divine projection may be “a happy liberation,” a clearing of the stage in which just two characters remain: “man and nature, subject and object” (221).<sup>1</sup> Distracted no longer by the thought of

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<sup>1</sup> Many readers have commented on the sombre trajectory of a great deal of Stevens’ verse. As Frank Doggett put it so eloquently in an early essay on Stevens as “the poet of Earth,” even in the moments of its greatest creative power, the “mind. . . is only a mortal spirit, a poor animal with numbered days playing the frail guitar of its poetic imagination” (“This Invented World,” 374).

heaven, human beings may at last become intent *ephebes* of the soil beneath their feet. As Miller puts it, "Culture has always been based on the permanence of sun, air, and earth. Now man knows that this is so. He knows that 'The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world' ("Esthétique du Mal," xv, 1-2), and this brings about a sudden miraculous recovery of the vitality of earth" (223). Certainly, this is the possibility suggested by many of Stevens' poems: "The Auroras of Autumn" (1948) instructs us to think "in the idiom of an innocent earth, / Not of the enigma of the guilty dream" (ix, 2-3); "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" urges us to remember that "the particulars of rapture come" when "Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace" (I, iv, 6, 4); and "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light" (1942) conjures us to hearken to our "elemental parent, the green night" (11). And, of course, there is the Sabbath-slighting woman of "Sunday Morning" who recognizes that with the sky no longer a "dividing and indifferent blue" (iii, 15), the measures of her now doubly earth-bound soul will forever be "the bough of summer and the winter branch" (ii, 15)

But as Stevens himself knew well, and early, even those boughs and branches could not be apprehended "in themselves": "It is never the thing but the version of the thing" ("The Pure Good of Theory," iv, 1) that we contemplate. Stevens *was*, as Miller observed over forty years ago, a poet of the mind's creative eye:

From one end of his work to the other he reiterates a single idea, and all his work is an attempt to explore the endlessly variable perspectives from which reality can be viewed by the imagination. He is resolutely carrying out Nietzsche's injunction that man the survivor of God should experiment tirelessly with new truths, new representations, new life forms. (225)

A poem like “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917) does indeed suggest Stevens as a tireless perspectivist. But as Miller himself is swift to observe, “Stevens’ poems are rarely celebrations of the triumphant ease with which man ‘imposes orders as he thinks of them’ (225, citing “It Must Be Abstract,” vii, 1). Indeed, it is precisely ease which eludes the poet as “[his] mind wanders here and there seeking to capture a reality which is itself eternally changing” (233). An early canto in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” offers the same sombre conclusion: “From this the poem springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days” (I, iv, 15-18). As I recall in my first chapter, Miller became, in the early 1980s, an eloquent exponent of Nietzschean play in Stevens. But his earlier, less ludic, reading of the poet makes a forceful case that in Stevens’ poetry, the imagination is “driven to its extravagant peregrinations not by a desire for novelty but by the fact that none of its strategies attains the fusion with life that it wants” (235). It is Miller’s earlier sense of Stevens as “a poe[t] of reality”—and especially as one who desired “fusion” with the world—that I wish to pursue here.

As in preceding chapters, my argument responds in significant measure to B. J. Leggett’s reading of the early Stevens. Taking as my starting point Leggett’s exegesis of a commitment to a Nietzschean creative will-to-power in Stevens, I have, to this point, sought only to complicate his thesis by showing how the poet extends this power to women and to the “common man”—thus expanding by far the constituency of Nietzsche’s own polity of gravity-defying “free spirits.” In this chapter, however, I turn from examining Stevens’ poetic representations of “the will of men” (representations which I follow Leggett in reading as significantly Nietzschean) to considering the poet’s approach to “the meaning of the earth”—“*der Sinn der Erde*” as Nietzsche

puts it in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—arguing for fundamental differences.

According to Leggett, Stevens' earth-bound aesthetic is *fundamentally* underwritten by something very like Nietzsche's postulation, in the Book I of *Will to Power*, that the world is nothing more than "a *perspectival appearance* whose origin lies in us" (15, italics in original).<sup>2</sup> Recalling the "muddy centre" that is identified as preceding humanity and its myths in the fourth canto of the first part of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Leggett observes how "at times Stevens' poems assume a world that is real, present, but crude or undifferentiated—a slovenly wilderness, the sea, a snow-covered landscape, clattering bucks, a giant yokel—something that must be given form or civilized" (179). He then quotes at length from Arthur Danto's influential discussion of *der Sinn der Erde* in Nietzsche. Here is Leggett's citation of Danto, in full:

Nietzsche could not quite bring himself to the point of becoming an idealist, for whom there is no world outside the articulations of the mind. Nor could he quite become a phenomenologist, believing that whatever is finally meaningful can be expressed in terms of our own [sense] experience. He could not do this because he felt, and not so differently from either Kant or Spinoza, that there was a world which remained over, tossing blackly like the sea, chaotic relative to our distinctions and perhaps to all distinctions, but there nevertheless. To some extent he was seduced by his own arguments. Because he wanted to say that all our

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Nietzsche offers this position as something of an hypothesis, as an expression of "the most extreme form of nihilism . . . the view that *every* belief, every considering-something-true, is necessarily false because there is simply no *true world*" (italics in original). It is also rather disconcerting to find Nietzsche himself qualifying his comment on the fact that the world is nothing more than "a *perspective appearance* whose origin lies in us" with the parenthetical observation, "in so far as we continually *need* a narrower, abbreviated, simplified world" (italics in original).

beliefs are false, he was constrained to introduce a world for them to be *false about*; and this *had* to be a world without distinctions, a blind, empty, structureless thereness. . . . Nietzsche's view of the world verges on a mystical, ineffable vision of a primal, undifferentiated *Ur-Eine*, a Dionysiac depth.

(179, Danto 96, square brackets and italics in original)

Passing over Danto's suggestion that Nietzsche's philosophical mandate pre-determined his sense of the world as a "structureless thereness," Leggett identifies a kindred approach to "reality" in Stevens: "It is perhaps because [his] early poems also accept a world without meaningful distinctions as the ground on which our varied interpretations impose their patterns that so much of his perspectivist poetry is built on the opposition of chaos and order" (179).

As Leggett's eloquent analysis of the aphoristic style of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" reveals, Stevens can most productively be read as a Nietzschean. When his subject is the power of the imagination, the poet could, indeed, be channeling the philosopher from Basel. Yet this much-cited early poem could also be read as an early illustration of Stevens' mature contention in "The Noble Rider" that the "nature of poetry" is "an *interdependence* of the imagination and reality as equals" (*CPP* 659, italics mine). Many of Stevens' poems do suggest a Nietzschean investment in viewing the world as an entity "present beyond dispute that is nevertheless impervious to description 'as it really is'" (Leggett 179). Even so, some of these same poems—and certainly others besides—engage this irremediable failure to connect very differently from the philosopher's texts in passionately beholding this material shadow of the world with the eyes—and ears—of a lover who first and foremost wishes to acknowledge the *positive* identity and existence of his beloved. Following such critics as Vendler and Lensing, I

read this passionate attachment to the *idea* of the world as “present beyond dispute”—even as it remains forever aloof and unknowable—as the fundamental drive in Stevens’ poetic art. As he puts it in “A Primitive Like an Orb” (1948), “The lover, the believer and the poet. / Their words are chosen out of their desire” (iv, 4-5).

In pages following, I offer close readings of two poems from *Harmonium* which evidently take the relation between the artist—as, I will argue, “lover, believer, and poet”—and “the meaning of the earth” as their chief subject: “Earthy Anecdote” (1918) and “The Snow Man” (1921). As “Sunday Morning” likewise meditates on this relation, I turn once more to this important poem at the end of this chapter. I also turn briefly to another short poem from *Harmonium*, “Of the Surface of Things.” Whereas Leggett presents these poems as focused on the artist (and readers) as Nietzschean perspectivists—that is, as those who would “*be* the meaning of the earth” to recur to my opening epigraph from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*— I read these texts rather as focused on the poetic—and psychological—necessity of never ceasing to *behold* the earth as meaningful unto itself. As Stevens would put it many years later in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949), “We keep coming back and coming back to the real” (ix, 1-2)—though this may be nothing more than “a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” (xxxix, 17-18). It is my contention that “Earthy Anecdote,” “Of the Surface of Things,” “The Snow Man,” and “Sunday Morning” reveal Stevens as only partially committed to a program of Nietzschean perspectivism. It is undeniable that Stevens was a post-Nietzschean poet, that he wrote in the full belief that the gods are dead, and in the belief that reality is “[n]ot that which is but that which is apprehended” (“Ordinary Evening,” v, 3). But unlike Nietzsche, he remained temperamentally and aesthetically predisposed to a “love of the real” (ibid, viii, 3)



and driven to search for this love object as something ultimately external to himself. In the twenty-second canto of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Professor Eucalyptus (whom I read as a spokesman for Stevens himself) declares “The search / For reality [to be] as momentous as / The search for god” (1-3). Meditating parabolically on this monumental quest, Stevens first presents the philosopher’s search for reality as “For an interior made exterior”—thus making the philosopher more or less a Nietzschean perspectivist—and then the poet’s search for reality as “for the same exterior made / Interior” (3-5). The syntactical compression of this passage makes it nearly impossible to determine if Stevens means to distinguish between the philosopher’s and the poet’s search for reality, or to hold them in parallel. What is clear, however, is that the poem suggests that both philosopher and poet should be focused on things external and prior:

“breathless things broodingly abreath // With the inhalations of original cold / And of original earliness” (6-8). Equally striking is the canto’s insistence that humble *re*-creation, not quasi-divine fiat, is the proper task of philosopher and poet, as searchers:

. . .the sense

Of cold and earliness is a daily sense,

Not the predicate of bright origin.

Creation is not renewed by images

Of lone wanderers. To re-create, to use

The cold and earliness and bright origin

Is to search. Likewise to say of the evening star

That it is wholly an inner light, that it shines

From the sleepy bosom of the real, re-creates,

Searches a possible for its possiblness. (8-18)

Stevens' rejection of the "lone wanderer" might be taken as a rejection of transcendentalist philosophizing or of any number of sublime Romantic solitaires. But Zarathustra is arguably one philosopher / poet whose Promethean efforts to embody "the predicate of bright origin"—to imaginatively assume the power of the solar presence—cause him to neglect the "daily sense" of "cold and earliness," and Stevens' reflections on the quotidian as "the meaning of the earth" might be brought into illuminating intertextual conjunction with Zarathustra's own very different musings on *der Sinn der Erde*. Of course, however, the import of this phrase in Nietzsche is hardly straightforward. Prior to offering my reading of the relation between "the meaning of the earth" and the creative will of men expressed in "Earthy Anecdote," "Of the Surface of Things," "The Snow Man," and "Sunday Morning," I would, therefore, make a brief excursion into Nietzsche's own resolutely creative approach to "*der Sinn der Erde*"—an approach given bravado expression in the three hundred and second aphorism in *The Gay Science*: "I am no seeker. I want to create my own sun for myself."

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In his foreword to *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche assures his readers that his over-all purpose has been to rescue "reality"—that is, for him, the "reality of appearances"—from those ignoble ones who either out of fear or greed would construct some other world: "One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously

invented an ideal world.”<sup>3</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche envisions the “strange and wonderful task” of “translat[ing] the human back into nature,” such that it might stand “with fearless Oedipus-eyes and stopped-up Odysseus ears, deaf to the enticements of all the metaphysical bird-catchers who have been whistling to him for too long: ‘You are more! You are of another origin!’” (230). And in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has his eponymous hero exhort an assembly of burghers to “*remain faithful to the earth*, and . . . not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!” (Prologue, italics in original)

These and other such statements rejecting the metaphysical realm and so seemingly celebrating the physical earth have in recent years provided fertile soil for eco-philosophical readings of Nietzsche. Lawrence Lampert, for example, in *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche*, describes Nietzsche’s thought as “a complete immanentism affirming the natural order, an ecological philosophy . . . [which seeks] . . . the naturalization of the human—his groundwork for a human society that affirms the natural order as it is” (278). Most recently, in *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of Earth*, Adrian Del Caro submits that “the most serious use to which Nietzsche can be put . . . is the reclamation and preservation of the earth—he made this his task, he set the standard at the threshold of the ecological age, for humanity’s first attempt to dwell affirmatively, intelligently, and in partnership with the earth”

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<sup>3</sup> While Nietzsche generally means the transcendental when he speaks of otherworldliness, he is concerned with immanent, secular idols as well. See, for example, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, where both the idea of heaven and the idea of the state, “that coldest of all cold monsters” (I, xi), are excoriated as ideals / idols which deny or denigrate the “reality” of earth. See also Kaufmann on the State as “the Devil of Nietzsche’s ethics” (135).

(49).<sup>4</sup> That Nietzsche's writings might be put to work in defense of our beleaguered planet is a heartening thought—but hardly a self-evident one: while the philosopher's rejection of idealism does in critical ways "affir[m] the natural order as it is," Nietzsche himself repeatedly insisted that nature "itself" be recognized as "a creation which is subjective in highest degree."<sup>5</sup> When Zarathustra first encounters the burghers at the start of his first "down-going," he does indeed exhort them to "remain faithful to the earth" (Prologue), but it is the more comprehensive instruction which his disciples receive at the end of Book I which may more fully present his view on the relation between humans and their planetary home: "Let your bestowing love and your knowledge be devoted to *be* the meaning of the earth! . . . that it may give to the earth its meaning, a human meaning!" (xxii, 2, italics added).<sup>6</sup>

Where Stevens would say, "I must impale myself on reality" (*OP*, 238), Nietzsche projects the apogee of the human power to make the world in the coming *Übermensch*, whom we are told "*shall be* the meaning of the earth!" (*Z*, Prologue, iii, italics in original). Just what this meaning shall be never becomes clear, but it is clearly triumphant, an erotic drive to encompass all things in an ecstatic "Yes." The lack of inspired erotic connection in accustomed ways of

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of an "ecological" Nietzsche, see Graham Parkes in Lippitt, 167-89, and also Parkes' earlier monograph, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology* (1994).

<sup>5</sup> See "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" in Breazeale, pg. 87. Nietzsche continues, "All that we actually know about these laws of nature is what we ourselves bring to them—time and space, and therefore relationships of succession and number."

<sup>6</sup> And so Sarah Kofman, commenting on Nietzsche's desire "to translate man back into [the text of] nature," will insist that this "text" is for the philosopher "constituted, not given . . . [and] interpretation is not a commentary on a pre-existing text; what exists before the interpreting is not text, but chaos" (137-138).

knowing the earth seems to be the underlying target of Nietzsche's metaphoric assault first on the moon and then on the clouds in Books II and III of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Here is Zarathustra *contra* the (man-in-the) moon:

Indeed, he is not much of man either, this shy nocturnal enthusiast. Verily,  
with a bad conscience he passes over the roofs.

For he is lecherous and jealous, the monk in the moon; lecherous after the  
earth and all the joys of lovers.

No, I do not like him, this tom-cat on the roofs! I loathe all that crawls  
about half-closed windows!

Piously and silently he passes over carpets of stars:—but I do not like  
softly treading men's feet, on which no spur jingles. (*Z II, xxxvii*).<sup>7</sup>

Against such pruriently immaculate perception Zarathustra then offers the lusty, but “innocent”  
creative desire of the dawning sun: “Look there: how she approaches impatiently over the sea.  
Do you not feel the thirst and the hot breath of her love? She would suck at the sea and drink its  
depths to her heights.”

And here is Zarathustra *contra* the clouds, which dare besmirch the clear vault of the  
dawn sky into which he sings an adoring song of praise:

O heaven above me, pure and deep! You abyss of light! Seeing you, I  
tremble with godlike desires. . .

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Conway cautions against “precipitately attributing to Nietzsche the provisional teachings of Zarathustra” (215). In here making Zarathustra an unironized spokesman for Nietzsche, I follow Walter Kaufmann, Ofelia Schutte and numerous other readers.

Together we have learned everything; together we have learned to ascend  
over ourselves to ourselves and to smile cloudlessly—

— To smile down cloudlessly from bright eyes and from a vast distance,  
when constraint and contrivance and guilt steam beneath us like rain. . . .

And whom did I hate more than passing clouds, and all that stains you? . . .

I loathe the drifting clouds, those stealthy great cats which prey on what  
you and I have in common—the uncanny, unbounded Yes and Amen. (III, xlviii)<sup>8</sup>

Ten years before, in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” Nietzsche had in similar vein equated clouds with cravenness, with “a pressing need,” and celebrated the “Olympian cloudlessness” (Breazeale 91) with which the intuitive man in ancient Greece had gaily shown “art’s mastery over life” (ibid 90).

In thus highlighting Nietzsche’s metaphoric assault on the moon and clouds in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, I do not mean to diagnose in the philosopher some undercurrent of distaste for the natural world.<sup>9</sup> My contention is not that Nietzsche failed to “love” the earth (in the broad sense of the natural order), but rather that his philosophical concerns lay with the lover far more than with the beloved. As *Thus Spake Zarathustra* makes clear, Nietzsche’s abiding romance was with the idea of man triumphant, self-overcoming, and purged of cowardice and shame. (And so

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<sup>8</sup> See also *Zarathustra’s Prologue* where he speaks of “the dark cloud” man.

<sup>9</sup> As it happens, however, Nietzsche did apparently possess a personal antipathy to clouds. In a letter to Franz Overbeck, dated September 18, 1881, he writes, “[W]hat a summer I have had! My physical agonies were as many and various as the changes I have seen in the sky. In every cloud there is some form of electric charge which grips me suddenly and reduces me to complete misery. . . . Where is there on earth that perpetually serene sky, which is my sky?” (*SL*, 179).

it is that Nietzsche's prophet will exhort his followers to "*be* the meaning of the earth," rather than to simply be "faithful" to that sphere, as he initially urges the burghers he encounters at the beginning of his first "down-going.") So far, Zarathustra's denunciation of "the monk in the moon" can be read as a continuation of the attack on old habits of mind and Judeo-Christian guilt that Nietzsche first launched in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The moon here is a figure in a metaphysical allegory that seems to have little to do with the natural order.

But if the passage has little direct connection to the natural order *per se*, little connection to any particular moonlit cloudscape, it does turn on how the natural order is perceived. As I read it, Zarathustra's assault on the impotent "peeping-tom" perception of the man in the moon and on the depressively obscuring nature of clouds gives a critical clue to Nietzsche's own ideal orientation vis-à-vis the earth. Illustrating Bachelard's sense of Nietzsche's "ascensional psyche," the philosopher seems invariably to project this relation as from a great height, "from a vast distance"—the earth itself being constituted into erotic life under a nobly "bestowing" eye of a perceiver who, like the sun, sees with an "unbounded Yes and Amen" and in such a boundless seeing, does not behold the earth, but rather *creates* it. Thus Zarathustra says in concluding his denunciation of the moon's furtive relation with the earth: "Verily, like the sun do I love life and all deep seas. And this is what perceptive knowledge means to me: all that is deep shall rise to *my* heights" (italics added). That is, in both cases, moon and clouds disrupt what is named in *Beyond Good and Evil* as "the pathos of distance . . . that longing for an ever-increasing widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, more remote, tenser, more

comprehensive states, in short precisely the elevation of the type ‘man’” (257).<sup>10</sup>

Of course, Bachelard’s diagnosis of an “ascensional” Nietzsche by no means negates recent efforts to discover a more *earth*-bound philosopher: I, for one, hope that our sense of Nietzsche as an “ecological thinker,” to use Graham Parkes’ phrase, *will* be broadened and deepened by further study. The very existence of such “green” approaches to Nietzsche, however, whatever their credibility, helps me to clarify two points that I would make in this chapter about Stevens. First, critics like Leggett and Bloom who foreground Nietzschean intertext and /or influence at work in poems like “Earthy Anecdote,” “The Snow Man,” and “Sunday Morning” see nothing “green” in the relation between imagination and reality that they describe in these poems—a fact hardly surprising given that the approaches of both men preclude consideration of the latter as a material force or presence. My second point, however, is that the *effect* of such persuasive and influential Nietzschean readings of “Earthy Anecdote,” “The Snow Man,” and “Sunday Morning” is to occlude appreciation of just how “green” these poems may be. As I will show, the relationship between imagination and reality in these notably

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<sup>10</sup> I must here acknowledge David Jarraway’s important analysis of the poetics and rhetoric of “distance” in modernist American literature: *Going the Distance: Dissident Subjectivity in Modernist American Literature* (2003). As Jarraway notes in his introduction, the act of “keeping one’s distance” can function in two ways: as “a sort of self-protective mechanism that would stave off the alterity of experience by foundationalizing truths” and as “a type of optative psychic space that manifests itself . . . as a kind of ‘delicacy and fragility of thinking’ that would honor ‘the impossibility of a coincidence between the idea and what fulfills it’” (7, internal citations from Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, 127). As Jarraway notes further, the poems of Wallace Stevens exhibit both forms of “keeping one’s distance.” In insisting that Stevens’ poetic hugged the contours of the earth in ways that might place him at odds with Nietzsche’s own “ascensional” poetic philosophy, I do not mean to deny Stevens’ own brave commitment to the fragile and delicate thoughts and acts that can only occur when we “throw away the lights, the definitions” and walk in “the madness of space” (“The Man with the Blue Guitar,” xxxii).



Nietzschean poems is clearly “greener” than has been heretofore recognized—and perhaps even in Nietzschean ways if critics like Lampert and Del Caro are to be believed.

As Bart Eeckhout suggests in “Wallace Stevens’ ‘Earthy Anecdote’; or, How Poetry Must Resist Ecocriticism Almost Successfully,” published in 2009, Stevens’ poems do not generally fall as plums into the hands of readers of eco-critical bent, often appearing rather to “give of bird or bush” about as willingly as that famous jar in Tennessee. And so it is that only one book-length study of Stevens as an “eco-poet” exists to date, Gyorgyi Voros’ *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1997), which reads Stevens’ art as “promot[ing] an ethos . . . [which] articulates a philosophy for living and models a fruitful, enriching, and above all, necessary relation to the physical world” (14). Unfortunately, however, as Eeckhout notes, Voros’s study ranges neither broadly enough nor deeply enough to make her thesis persuasive: “to distil a more or less consistent worldview, no matter how ecologically visionary in its appeal, from a poet as deliberately antisystematic, counterintuitive, and full of surprises as Stevens is a risky undertaking: it tends to contain what on the page struggles hard to resist containment” (174). Eeckhout’s own spirited reading of the multi-valencies of “Earthy Anecdote” confirms the extent to which Stevens’ art perpetually “defers the satisfaction of interpretive closure” (183). It is nonetheless possible, however, to make more of the “earthy” elements in “Earthy Anecdote” than does Eeckhout—or Voros, for that matter.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> While Eeckhout concedes that this “very sly poem. . . *is* about Stevens’ investment in earth’s natural cycles and its unspoiled natural environments, and it *is* an affirmation (if an ambiguous one) of natural vitality rooted in the body and the senses” (190, italics in original), he insists that “Earthy Anecdote” is primarily “about” poetry and the poet. And so does he ultimately find the poem “to serve as a minor litmus test for what we think a would-be ecological poetry and a responsive ecocriticism may legitimately hope to convey” (191). Readers will not

At the beginning of this chapter, I recalled Leggett's allusion to the "muddy centre" which "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" identifies as that which existed "before we breathed" (I, iv, 12). Glossing this "centre" as "that [which] preceded our human efforts to make sense of it," Leggett thus frames Stevens' original clay as explicitly Nietzschean: materially "real," but inchoate and awaiting the ideas of order of humankind. But Leggett's reading scants the fact that Stevens' poem in fact declares this "muddy centre" *itself* to be a place of order: the locus for "a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete" (iv, 13-14). In the wake of such a comprehensive narrative, we are not creators, nor even explicators: rather, "we are the mimics"—and in a manner most *un*-Nietzschean—"the clouds are pedagogues" (19). Moreover, as "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" confirms two cantos further on, what we observe in this earth is an inherent order:

Perhaps  
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,  
  
A composing as the body tires, a stop  
To see hepatica, a stop to watch  
A definition growing certain and  
  
A wait within that certainty, a rest  
In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.  
Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,

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find Eeckhout's judgement here contradicted by *Notations of the Wild*, for although Voros invokes "Earthy Anecdote" in the title of the prologue to her book, she (inexplicably) fails to comment on the poem itself at any point.

As when the cock crows on the left and all  
Is well, incalculable balances,  
At which a kind of Swiss perfection comes

And a familiar music of the machine  
Sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances  
That we achieve but balances that happen. (vii, 2-15)

As a space productive of “times of inherent excellence” and of “balances that happen,” the world itself was evidently for Stevens an ordering principle. Pausing to look at the “hepatica” and hearing the “familiar music of the machine,” especially in the cyclical rhythms of spring, summer, fall, and winter, provides the human imagination with an essential substrate of meaning, a guide for thought, but especially for feeling: “Passion of rain, or moods in falling snow; / Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued / Elations when the forest blooms,” in the idiom of “Sunday Morning” (ii, 9-11).

Stevens’ sense of the “meaning of the earth” may indeed have been intermittently guided by some Nietzschean “pathos of distance . . . within the soul.” One need only consider the striking parallels between “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” and an aphorism from *The Gay Science*, titled “Genoa,” which speaks in praise of “superb, insatiable ego[tists]” whose “architectural thoughts” built the Italian city, and which rejoices in the fact that

here . . . on turning every corner you find a man by himself, who knows the sea,  
knows adventure, and knows the Orient, a man who is adverse to law and to  
neighbour, as if it bored him to have to do with them. . . . with a wonderful  
craftiness of fantasy, he would like, at least in thought, to establish all this anew,

to lay his hand upon it, and introduce his meaning into it—if only for the passing hour of a sunny afternoon, when for once his insatiable and melancholy soul feels satiety, and when only what is his own, and nothing strange, may show itself to his eye. (291)

In Stevens' poem we likewise find a solitary, aristocratic (that is, purple-robed) man who knows the sea, adventure, and the East, and who would build his own world—indeed, would *be* that very world. Stevens' palaz-dwelling Hoon surely outdoes the Nietzschean architects of Genoa in his “superb, insatiable egotism”:

Not less because in purple I descended  
The western day through what you called  
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?  
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?  
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,  
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.  
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

Reading Hoon as “the self in all its potential, the imagination at it were at the height of its powers,” Riddel finds this figure “eloquent and commanding” (*Clairvoyant Eye* 64). Hoon does,

indeed, show his imagination, like that famous jar of Stevens, “[taking] dominion everywhere,” but we may glimpse the limits of this power in his final comment about finding himself “more truly and *more strange*” (italics added). It is possible, of course, to read this recognition of “strangeness” positively, as further notice of the courageous compass of Hoon’s power. He is one who can embrace the non-identical (unlike Nietzsche’s Genoese who wants to see “only what is his own”). And yet there is poignancy in the word that ends the glorious egotism of “Tea at the Palaz at Hoon”: “strange.” This word, being after all the root of *stranger* and *estrangement*, arguably reinscribes the melancholy solitude which Hoon seems at pains to reject in his opening statement: “Not less because in purple I descended / The western day through what you called / The loneliest air, not less was I myself.” Indeed, I would contend that something of “the loneliest air” abides about a man whose confident assertion of identity via a six-fold iteration of *I* and a four-fold repetitions of *myself* is bookended by the decidedly down-beat phrases, “Not less” and “more strange.” As with Nietzsche, the inner distance of self-estrangement is here linked to exotic lands and vast expanses, but in Stevens this projection inward of Promethean vistas is tinged with a sense of lack and absence—indeed, with a sense that *meaning still lies elsewhere*: down below, up above, anywhere, in fact, upon the earth itself.<sup>12</sup>

One of Stevens’ most forceful—but also deeply enigmatic—explorations of the idea of the earth as an ordering principle is “Earthy Anecdote.” As John Miles notes, in his analysis of

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<sup>12</sup> In *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons* (2001), George Lensing identifies Stevens’ own profound and abiding loneliness—both personal and epistemological—as one of the drives of his art: “Stevens rescued himself from loss by reaching out for what had always bewitched and beckoned him, the world itself. If he could not find love in another, he could love star, sun, sea, and field. If he could not passionately *possess* another, he could passionately *pursue* the other, and to this end he gave both heart and head” (5).

the poem, this enigmatic “doorkeeper” (118) to Stevens’ poetic house presents a considerable challenge to the reader. Here is the poem in full:

Every time the bucks went clattering  
Over Oklahoma  
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,  
They went clattering,  
Until they swerved

In a swift, circular line  
To the left,  
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.  
The firecat went leaping,  
To the right, to the left,  
And  
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes  
And slept.

Stevens himself initially expressed some hesitation about the poem: submitting it to Carl Zigrosser, editor of the journal *The Modern School*, in the summer of 1918, two months after the publication of “Lettres d’un Soldat,” Stevens commented, “Here is a thing I like. If you don’t like it, don’t make any bones about saying so” (L 204). But that the poet himself did care for “Earthy

Anecdote” very much indeed is suggested by the fact that he maintained it as the opening poem in both his *Selected Works* (1953) and his *Collected Poems* (1954), after first selecting it to headline *Harmonium* in 1923.

For many readers, the riddling aspect of “Earthy Anecdote” *is* its theme. Thus Milton Bates describes the poem as

an emblem of one’s own engagement with this kind of poem: like the bucks, one’s clattering, discursive mind, swerves left or right whenever it approaches the firecat, thus duplicating the pattern of bafflement and evasion in the anecdote. The poem continues to produced its intended effect—an effect that is also its subject—as long as the firecat remains a source of perplexity. (152)

As Bates suggests, many critics have found the chief puzzle of the poem to be the firecat: although hardly transparent in meaning themselves, the bucks of “Earthy Anecdote” have attracted far less commentary. Generally, these skittish characters are regarded as decidedly secondary to the feline creature which springs into their path “[e]very time” they go “clattering / Over Oklahoma”—a figure that has been read as, among other things, an oil well, a prairie fire, and the sun. Most critics simply disregard Stevens’ own (admittedly cryptic) statement of intent that he meant “something quite concrete” by both the bucks and the firecats: “actual animals, not original chaos” (*L* 209). Many readers have approached “Earthy Anecdote” not as some little story “about” the earth, but rather as some kind of parable about the power of the artist. As George Betar puts it, “Stevens quite clearly envisions the poet, as, at least in part, a beast possessed of sheer animal vitality, with the power of discovering form in flux, of bringing order—however temporary—to chaos” (226).

In his analysis of “Earthy Anecdote,” Leggett offers fresh insight into the poem’s seeming preoccupation with chaos and order by reading it intertextually as a “geometrical simplification” (212) of Nietzschean perspectivism, of the doctrine of the Will to Power which Nietzsche believed found “every centre of power—and not man alone—construct[ing] the rest of the world *from its point of view*” (*WP*, II, 120). Sharing Bates’ sense that “Earthy Anecdote” is “about” the act of interpretation, Leggett reads the poem’s self-designation as an anecdote in explicitly Nietzschean terms, as the natural vehicle for pluralist thought. He does this by way of Nietzsche’s claim in his second preface to “Philosophy during the Tragic Age of the Greeks” (1873) that “It is possible to shape the picture of a man out of three anecdotes. I endeavour to bring into relief three anecdotes out of every system and abandon the remainder”—a claim which Gilles Deleuze summarizes in a pithy formulation, which Leggett also cites: “The anecdote is to life what the aphorism is to thought: something to interpret” (110). It is such a casting away of the contextualizing “remainder” that clears the ground for seemingly endless acts of interpretation. It is by designating the “firecat” as more significant, but less “real” than the bucks, that Leggett finds this enigmatic creature to figure “the text’s confession of its complicity in an infinite chain of representations” (209). That is, “the presence of this imaginative creature among the more mundane bucks appears to be the poem’s way of acknowledging its status as interpretation and thus of joining the host of Nietzschean interpretations that ‘announce themselves as such. . . . transmit[ing] that information through the very forms, the very styles. . . in which they are presented’”(209).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The internal citation is from Alexander Nehamas’ discussion of the relation between Nietzsche’s “most multifarious art of style” and his doctrine of perspectivism. According to



Given Leggett's reading of "Earthy Anecdote" as a poem "about" interpretation whose apparently animal principals should really be approached as abstract figures in a "geometrical simplification" (212) of Nietzschean perspectivism, it is ironic that his identification of the famous "fire-dog" episode found in Book III of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as a potent intertext for Stevens' poem arguably goes a considerable distance towards identifying a philosophical antecedent for that "imaginative creature," the *firecat*. That is, to read Leggett's discussion of the parallels between Nietzsche's "fire-dog" and Stevens' "firecat" is to wonder whether this poem might constitute hard evidence of the poet's significant engagement with the philosopher. (It is perhaps in uneasy acknowledgment of this impression that Leggett prefaces his discussion with the odd confession that he had "attempted . . . to suppress" such an "unlikely" [210] intertext for Stevens' poem.)

But, of course, the mapping of influence is not Leggett's purpose, and so he is careful to affirm the connections between Nietzsche's text and Stevens' poem at the level of the idea only. These are not easy to tease out, as Zarathustra's parable of the fire-dog—which in fact contains two such creatures—is baffling enough in itself. The first fire-dog is introduced by Zarathustra as one of the "diseases" of the skin of the earth (man in his current state is another)—and then called to account by Nietzsche's prophet for being a "dissembling" and vicious "braggart" who is nothing more than "the ventriloquist of the earth . . . embittered, mendacious, and shallow . . . [who] doth like to speak with smoke and roaring" (II, xl). Having rendered this unsavoury

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Nehamas, Nietzsche's many styles "show his perspectivism without saying anything about it, and to that extent they prevent his view that there are only interpretations from undermining itself" (40).

creature inarticulate with rage by this negative assessment of his character, Zarathustra then gleefully asserts the existence of another fire-dog, quite unlike its belching cousin, one that “speaketh out of the heart of the earth . . . adverse . . . [to first fire-dog’s] gargling and spewing and grips in the bowels.” Rejoicing in this second creature, Zarathustra declares that through its “golden” breath and laughter, “thou mayst know it, — *the heart of the earth is of gold*” (italics in original).

Reading Zarathustra’s parable in particular light of Deleuze’s comment that whereas the first fire-dog is purely reactive, “bustl[ing] about the surface, in the din and fumes,” the second fire-dog is “an affirmative animal” (170-71), Leggett judges that “in Stevens’ anecdote of the earth, the bustle and din of the surface of things is represented not by the sham fire-dog but by the clattering bucks. . . . [and] [t]he authentic fire-dog that gilds the world like the sun is represented by a firecat around whom the noisy bucks move but who later closes his bright eyes in sleep” (211). The turn to stillness and silence at the end of “Earthy Anecdote”—after, indeed, so much leaping and bristling and general bustle—is critical in Leggett’s alignment of Stevens’ text with Nietzsche’s as he completes his exegesis of the poem with Zarathustra’s own counsel to beware “great events” when there is much roaring and smoke about them.” Zarathustra declares,

And believe me, friend Hollabaloo! The greatest events—are not our  
noisiest, but our stillest hours.

Not around the inventors of new noise, but around the inventors of new  
values, doth the world revolve; *inaudibly* it revolveth.” (italics in original)

In Leggett’s reading, the bright-eyed firecat—doubly suggestive in a Nietzschean paradigm of both the solar presence and of the “golden” heart of the earth—is, from first to last, a figure of

the artist as Nietzschean perspectivist: that is, it is the fire-cat's active bristles and leaps which bring meaning to the chaos of reactive ungulates whose default motion is an otherwise aimless "clattering."

Leggett's reading of "Earthy Anecdote" thus presents the poem first and foremost as being about "the meaning of the earth" as it is forged by the poet: "The bucks are ordered only in the presence of the firecat, and after he has 'closed his bright eyes / And slept,' one presumes that they revert to their disordered clatter" (209).<sup>14</sup> Again, Leggett reads this poem within an explicitly Nietzschean paradigm in which primordial chaos, that "structureless thereness" (the bucks), is temporarily ordered by the perspectivizing powers of the artist (the bright-eyed firecat). But as Leggett himself admits, "'Earthy Anecdote,' unlike the other perspectivist poems . . . does not make altogether clear the nature of its ordering principle. It asks us to solve the riddle of the firecat . . . and as far as I know, the readers are still guessing" (ibid.).

There is no doubt that "Earthy Anecdote" *is* a riddle, and it seems very likely that riddling *per se* is an important part of the story that this poem wishes to tell. But there may be more than one way to read this riddling. For example, one need not necessarily interpret the firecat and bucks as abstract symbols of order and chaos, respectively. If we do engage with Stevens' own insistence that bucks and firecat are "actual animals," the apparent symmetry of their movements, leaping and swerving left and right, across the Oklahoma prairie may be read, not as the product of the artist's will-to-order, but as the by-product—"balances that happen," to recur to the language of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—of the ontologically and epistemologically

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<sup>14</sup> To properly follow Leggett's point, it is necessary to adjust the citation from Stevens' poem to read "closed his bright eyes / [In sleep]."

*equivalent* motions of a predator and its prey.

As discussed above, Leggett reads “Earthy Anecdote” as a “geometrical simplification” of Nietzschean perspectivism by foregrounding Deleuze’s sense of the (Nietzschean) anecdote as “something to interpret.” In advancing this perspective on the anecdote, Leggett explicitly rejects Lentricchia’s characterization of the form as a “little story . . . [that] stands in for a bigger story, a socially pivotal and culturally pervasive biography which it illuminates” (3). According to Leggett, Lentricchia’s attempt to read such poems as “Anecdote of a Jar” in socio-political terms is to radically misread a text whose core aesthetic is abstraction. Leggett may well be correct in his judgement here: “Anecdote of a Jar” certainly seems first and foremost to be “about” poetry. Nonetheless, there may be merit in applying Lentricchia’s definition of the anecdote as a “representation of radical aesthetic unself-sufficiency” (7) to “Earthy Anecdote.” Taking up Lentricchia’s conviction that in the anecdote “there is always something outside the text” (7), I understand “Earthy Anecdote” as a “little story” that “stands in for” nothing less than the irresolvable riddle of the relation *between* the reality and imagination—a riddle which, however, begins with the faith, expressed by Stevens at one point in his *Adagia*, that “all of our ideas come from the natural world” (*CPP* 903).

And so I interpret “Earthy Anecdote,” in part, as a “little story” sketched out of natural history. Within this biological (rather than biographical or social) frame, we might describe the poem as a scene “red in tooth and claw.” Certainly, that bucks and firecat encounter each other in “Oklahoma” might identify the poem as figuring the American wilderness: in a letter written to Elsie during a business trip to Oklahoma City in the autumn of 1916, Stevens speaks in anticipation of “a land of mustangs, Indians etc.” (*L* 198). Perhaps on this very journey, the

young Stevens was lucky enough to catch sight of a mountain lion, one of the denizens of the Oklahoma wilderness, attacking a group of mule deer bucks, and observe them repeatedly dodging, left and right, to avoid their assailant.<sup>15</sup> In Stevens' carefully crafted poem, however, the instinctual movements of cat and bucks appear choreographed. Adopting the artist's perspective, we observe reality and the imagination enacting an intricate dance which finds the firecat and bucks together carving "a moving contour," a sliver of the "fluent mundo" ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," III, x) across the Oklahoma plain. Through the lens of art, death *is* the mother of beauty. But as "Earthy Anecdote" is at pains to remind us, or so I contend, death would also attend a mountain lion catching hold of its long-limbed breakfast.

I agree with Bates and Leggett that "Earthy Anecdote" requires an active reader—that interpretation, *not* exposition, is its primary drive. But interpreting "Earthy Anecdote" entirely by way of Nietzschean perspectivism, that is, as a poem which finds the chaos of the earth being brought to (temporary) order by the artist, creates a blindness to the ways in which the poem may figure the earth itself as an ordering principle. For Leggett, the firecat is the active agent, while the bucks are nothing but "mundane" reaction. But surely both firecat and bucks are *mutually/reciprocally* impelled and impelling. Admittedly, the first three stanzas seem to foreground the motive and directive power of the firecat. But the fourth stanza firmly reorients our gaze to

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<sup>15</sup> Stevens' journal entries from his hunting trip to south-eastern British Columbia find him similarly relishing the wildness of this part of the world—that is, until the exhaustion of bush-wacking "through burnt timber patches, willow swamps, slash etc" began to take its toll. Stevens records having "a huge amount of venison . . . on hand, however" (L 67) and may have had some opportunity to observe the behaviour of herds alarmed by the threat of hunters, and other predators. Young mule deer bucks do often congregate in small groups of three or four, outside the rutting season.

affirm the power of the bucks to initiate and direct movement in the firecat:

The bucks clattered.  
The firecat went leaping,  
To the right, to the left,  
And  
Bristled in the way.

It may be worth pointing out that if this firecat is anything kin to the “real” big cats of the earth, somnolence would be his default mode. We don’t know what the firecat was doing before the bucks arrive, but the poem ends with this creature fast asleep.

As Leggett notes, we are not told what the bucks do once the firecat falls asleep, but it is reasonable to assume that they *do* return to clattering in no particular direction to and fro across the prairie: as the opening line of “Earthy Anecdote” implies, such is their habitual movement. But other questions also remain unanswered, such as, “does the firecat sleep with a full belly, or an empty one?” Such a question might appear to belong to the “how many children had Lady Macbeth?” variety, but whether the firecat gets his breakfast is, in fact, another one of the riddles of the poem. Indeed, the enigmatic observation with which the poem ends, “Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes / And slept,” solicits our attention to this question. Notably, however, the poem leaves us none the wiser. Perhaps the bucks escaped. (Then again, there is something ominous in that word “Later” which suggests that the firecat does not dream on an empty stomach.) In any case, the question of whether the firecat had his breakfast is worth posing simply because our inability to answer it highlights Stevens’ decision to keep the final outcome of the encounter between bucks and cat out of sight and thus *beyond our making*. Interpreting

“Earthy Anecdote” as withholding part of the story from the readers / viewer engages with Stevens’ insistence that firecat and bucks are “actual animals,” are, in some important sense, creatures of an earth that was “venerable, articulate, complete” long before the coming of humans. The contrast here is, then, one between simple beasts, part of a natural order complete in itself, and its perceivers— “clever beasts” as Nietzsche designated humans in his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense.”

A similar valorization of the earth prior to any imposition by “clever animals” can be seen in Stevens’ enigmatic early poem “Of the Surface of Things” (1919). Here is that poem in full:

I

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;  
But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four  
hills and a cloud.

II

From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,  
Reading where I have written,  
“The spring is like a belle undressing.”

III

The gold tree is blue.  
The singer has pulled his cloak over his head.  
The moon is in the folds of the cloak.

In his reading of this poem, and elsewhere, Leggett draws heavily on “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” which rejects the idea of universal constants and defines truth as “a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms” (84), and has become, as Leggett

notes, “a central reference for contemporary theorists” (163).<sup>16</sup> As Leggett reads it, “Of the Surface of Things” offers perfect illustration of Nietzsche’s demolition in “On Truth and Lies” of the notion that our metaphors touch the reality of things:

What arbitrary demarcations! . . . . What one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing. . . . When we believe that we know something about things themselves when we talk about trees, colours, snow and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. (83)

Leggett also finds here clear presentation of Nietzsche’s insistence that humans “are deeply immersed in illusions and dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see ‘forms.’ Their senses nowhere lead to truth, on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things” (Breazeale, 80). As Leggett reads “Of the Surface of Things,” the poem participates fully in Nietzsche’s foregrounding of the fundamentally aesthetic relation between ourselves and the world, “remember[ing] that our demarcations of trees and colors is so arbitrary as to result in apparent paradox: ‘The gold tree is blue’ (iii, 1)” (164).<sup>17</sup>

The second and third cantos of “Of the Surface of Things” surely lend support to Leggett’s contention that the poem “illustrates both the manner in which we glance over the

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Riddel in “Neo-Nietzschean Clatter.”

<sup>17</sup> Robert Buttel offers another explanation for this image, that it is deliberately painterly. Buttel notes that “Of the Surface of Things” is one of a number of poems which cause “the surface of *Harmonium* [to] nearly persuad[e] the reader that one of his aims was to abolish the distinctions between poetry and painting” (148).



surface of things and create forms and the degree to which these forms are the metaphors and similes of human fancy” (164). But the poem’s opening gambit is less accommodating: “In my room, the world is beyond my understanding; / But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud.” As a description of an “actual” landscape, this is clearly inadequate: the numerical precision of “three or four hills and a cloud” shows the perspectival eye of the poet still at work. Nonetheless, the lack of imaginative flourish in the poem’s first foray into describing “the surface of things” and its explicit statement that one gains “understanding” of the world through the physical act of walking through it arguably asserts the objective and meaningful existence of the earth. As I read Stevens, this persistent assertion of the earth as the bedrock of meaning—“The real is only the base. But it is the base,” as Stevens put it in a famous aphorism in *Materia Poetica* (CPP 917)—affirms that while often engaged in Nietzschean meditations on the arbitrary nature of perspectivizing, the necessary illusions of that species of “clever beast,” humankind, he was equally prone to pursue a very different line on the question of our relation to the earth.

One of Stevens’ most powerful meditations on this question, this relation, is “The Snow Man,” which the poet himself once explained as “an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy it” (L 464). Such authorial glosses are rare in Stevens and critics have been, in any case, reluctant to take them as gospel, none more so than Bloom, who judges the above authorial interpretation of “The Snow Man” to be “the worst possible reading . . . of [the] poem” (63). According to Bloom, Stevens’ explanation “takes care of less than half the poem, the part in which ‘reality’ is ‘regarded,’ and not the larger part in which ‘reality’ is ‘beheld’ and so begins to become a passion” (ibid.). While my own reading in

fact affirms Stevens' "explanation," it also owes something to Bloom, not least to his reading of "The Snow Man" as first and foremost a meditation on *perception* around which the processes of pre-conception, conception and reception are all in riddling play. Also important in this meditation is, of course, perspective: the poem's *raison d'être*, after all, being the pursuit of "a mind of winter." Prior to engaging with Bloom's explication of "The Snow Man" as a movement into a perceiving "passion," I would therefore turn to Leggett's contrasting interpretation of the poem as a highly-wrought and abstract meditation on Nietzschean perspectivism.

Judging the poem, indeed, to foreground, consciously or not, the central paradox of a doctrine which holds that "for every being appearance is identical with reality in every respect" (180), Leggett finds "The Snow Man" to "as[k] whether a world could remain over if point of view were cancelled or what the features of a perspectiveless world might be" (187). According to Leggett, the poem "does not deny the existence of its blank world [in his reading, the "nothing that is"]; it simply assumes that any feature it might exhibit must be imposed on it by the perceiver. A perceiver who willed himself to impose nothing on the blank (if that were possible) would confront only the blank" (189). In "The Snow Man," Leggett hears Nietzsche chiding us, "As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective!" (*WP*, III, 567).

As Leggett himself acknowledges, however, "for fourteen of its fifteen lines, 'The Snow Man' appears to hold a very different epistemology. . . .[s]uggesting an operation by which a perceiver might truly behold a winter landscape" (188). Here is the poem in full:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs

Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

According to Leggett's Nietzschean reading, however, the first fourteen lines do, in fact, dictate the necessity of "divest[ing] oneself of any perspective that would interpret the scene" (188). This process of being "stripped of all human seeing and conceiving" (189), as Leggett sees it, proceeds without complication until the last line of the poem which affirms that with a "mind of winter" attained, one may behold "the nothing that is."

Because he interprets this "nothing" as "Nietzsche's featureless becoming, the ground upon which we construct our worlds (187) (as against Miller's earlier reading of "the nothing that is" as the space of Being), Leggett quite justifiably identifies, at this juncture, a contradiction in

“The Snow Man.” That is, reading Stevens’ “mind of winter” as one which “desire[s] [and can *achieve*] a world of perspectiveless beholding” (189), Leggett finds fundamentally contradictory the poem’s steady progress towards this desired “blank” via the *perception* of “pine-trees crusted with snow” and “spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun.” As Leggett reads “The Snow Man,” all these signs of human ordering—classification of arboreal species into subspecies, metaphoric descriptions of junipers being “shagged with ice,” the thought of time imbedded in the idea of a January sun—are precisely the ways of knowing the world that would be eschewed by “the mind of winter.” According to Leggett, therefore, “the argument of the poem may thus be reduced to this form: in order to realize x, surrender the faculties by which x is realized” (190).

Leggett’s argument is characteristically insightful. But it neglects to engage one piece of the poem which arguably stands in contradiction to its thesis. Again, Leggett suggests that if we were to follow the snow man in taking on his wintry state of mind we would be “stripped of *all* human seeing and conceiving” (italics added). While there is an evident drive towards reduced subjectivity in the poem, specifically the elimination of the pathetic fallacy, Leggett’s reading overlooks the fact the snow man is himself invested with a perceptive faculty. That is, he of the “mind of winter” is also, and to the last, “the listener, who listens in the snow” (13). It seems to me, therefore, that “The Snow Man” does not ask us to relinquish our capacity to perceive the earth, but rather that we learn to “see” it—that is, *regard / behold* it—as the snow man listens *to* it. The ultimate question, for my reading, is what such a “looking-as-if-one-were-listening” might mean.

Here, I must acknowledge my debt to Bloom’s reading of “The Snow Man.” Reminding

us that Stevens is in this poem, “as almost always . . . an orator with accurate speech” (57), he asks, “Is there a difference, for Stevens, between regarding and beholding, or is this merely elegant variation?” (ibid.). For Bloom, there is, indeed, a difference:

To “behold” is to gaze at or look upon, but with a touch of expressed amazement. The beholder *possesses* the object; his scrutiny is active, going back to the root *kel*, meaning to drive or set in swift motion. To “regard” is a warier more passive verb. It is to look at something attentively, or closely, but with a touch of looking back, a retrospect, stemming ultimately from the root *wer*, meaning to watch out for something. (57)

As Bloom reads it, “The Snow Man” thus begins with a verb “replete with negative intentionality”—a trajectory which he identifies as “prophetic” of later instances of “wary” perception in Stevens, such as that of the father in “The Auroras of Autumn” who “sits, / In space, wherever he sits, of bleak *regard*” (iv, 3, italics added)—and ends with a verb that for Bloom hints at a prodigal power latent in the solitary man of snow. No less than the wanderer of “Nomad Exquisite” (1919) who “beholds” the erotic abundance of Florida and sends forth erotic flares of “forms, flames, and the flakes of flames” (14), this frozen emblem of more austere climates will one day begin to generate his own internal heat—or so Bloom would have it. With characteristic aplomb, he announces, “The Snow Man is not yet Hoon, but he is going to be” (63).

I cannot follow Bloom in his estimation that Stevens’ silent and severe man of snow need only “behold” the land a little longer to be transformed into the oratorical and resplendent Hoon. Following such readers as MacLeod, Vendler, and the early Riddel, I place Stevens’

“Snow Man” and “Hoon” at opposite ends of an emotional—and aesthetic—spectrum in the poet. To read the Snow Man as nothing more than a precursor to Hoon is, I think, to neglect the former’s own independent stature as a figure of imaginative power, however austere. In a complicated mapping of anxious influence in “The Snow Man,” Bloom reads the poem as re-writing the venerable tradition of the “fictio[n] of the leaves” (59)—beginning in the *Iliad* and ending in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”—via Ruskin’s critique of the pathetic fallacy in *Modern Painters*. Citing Ruskin’s comparison of Dante’s perfect image of “spirits falling from the bank of Acheron ‘as dead leaves flutter from a bough’” (perfect because persistent in the “clear perception that *these* are souls, and *those* are leaves”) with Coleridge’s vision of “The one red leaf, the last of its clan, / That dances as often as dance it can” (a “morbid” and “false” image because the poet “fancies a life in [the leaf], and will, which there are not”), Bloom judges the Victorian critic’s reflections to place us “rather closer to the poem than many of its exegetes have been” (55). Following Bloom reading Ruskin, I, too, interpret Stevens’ poem of snow, and wind, and leaves, and bare places as “urgently seek[ing] to avoid any indulgence of the pathetic fallacy” (54), and, furthermore, as a “reduction to the First Idea” (58)—that elusive abstraction which Riddel describes as “one of a number of metaphors for a kind of ultimate reality” (49) in Stevens (others being the “rock,” the “supreme fiction,” and the “thing itself”), that brief original instant “in which self and reality were one” (167).

For Bloom, the snow man begins as a “regarder,” as a “trope of *ethos* or of Fate or of reduction to the First Idea,” but ends as “beholder,” as a “trope of *pathos* or Power, a revision or reimagining of the First Idea” (58). The roots of this paradoxical conjunction Bloom finds in the notorious moment in Emerson’s *Nature* when the speaker describes himself “[c]rossing a bare

common, in snow puddles, at twilight,” and, caught up in “a perfect exhilaration. . . . [s]tanding on the bare ground,—[his] head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,— [feels] all mean egotism vanis[h] . . . [and himself] become a transparent eyeball.” Again, I follow Bloom in finding the chill wind that blows in “The Snow Man” to be decidedly “New Englandly” (60), and agree that this “New Englandly” element declares an important debt to Emerson. But Bloom does go too far, I think, in suggesting that Stevens engages, even “very involuntar[ily]” (61), in Emersonian rhapsody. Observing that “Emerson will go on to say that ‘nature always wears the colors of the spirit,’ so that for him the pathetic fallacy is no fallacy but is *potentia*, or *pathos* as Power, the Will rampant,” Bloom implies that Stevens’ snow man shows signs of himself enjoying a perfectly Emersonian “exhilaration.” This triumphant finale to Bloom’s reading comes by way of a reference to Nietzsche’s culminating judgement at the end of *The Genealogy of Morals* that “man would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose.”

As I read it, however, “The Snow Man” shows Stevens as neither “a very involuntary Emersonian” nor a Nietzschean on the question of “the Will rampant.” His imaginative power—which is considerable—lies not in a projection of self into “Sublime emptiness” (Bloom 61), but rather an infinitely humble hearkening to a world full to the brim with life and meaning—however ultimately unaccessible. Ultimately identified as the “*listener*, who *listens* in the snow,” the snow man *is* singularly divested of “point of view”—that is, of the idiosyncratic perspective that attends acts of “regarding,” of seeing. But this cold and snowy man in a cold and snowy world is obviously *not* divested of all *perceptive* power as he stands listening with great attention to the sound of the wind rattling the dry leaves and blowing through the branches

of the pines and junipers. Where Bloom finds Stevens' poem to turn on its early shift from "regard" to "behold," I find the meaning of "The Snow Man" to crystalize around its final movement into an almost purely aural realm. While we have the capacity to "regard" and "behold," the snow man can only listen but in doing so would seem to sense the very earth itself. It is, I think, *because* he is possessed only of the *sound*, and not the *sight*, of the winter world around him, and therefore does not project (or at least projects to a lesser degree), that the snow man is able to perceive something of the world around him: even if that something is nothing more than "the nothing that is."<sup>18</sup>

Bloom emphasizes Stevens' repetition of "behold" in "The Snow Man" as affirming a movement towards ecstatic (Hoonian) possession of the world—and away from the guarded wariness of "regard." Turning, like Bloom, to the *OED* for support, I would suggest another possible reading of Stevens' chosen verbs of vision in "The Snow Man." One of the listed definitions of *regard* is "to consider, look on, view as being something specified." While arguably suggestive of *pre*-conception, this meaning of *regard* also suggests the existence of a meaningful sphere independent of the mind's creative eye. Such a sense is clearly ascertainable in *behold*, a word whose modern usage tends decidedly towards the passive, being expressive of the act of "*receiv[ing]* the impression of anything through the eyes." Where Bloom reads *behold* as denoting a Nietzschean possession of the world by "the Will rampant," I understand this privileged verb to valorize receptiveness, a hearkening to the world around one that

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<sup>18</sup> As Gary Shapiro makes clear in his fascinating book on "seeing and saying" in Foucault and Nietzsche, Nietzsche's engagement with tropes of vision was in fact very complex. Shapiro describes at length, for example, Nietzsche's critique of "the gaze." For Nietzsche, the ideal moment of vision was that of the *augenblick*, the glance or the blink of an eye (157-92).



corresponds to listening. To “regard / behold” the world as the snow man listens to it is to be acutely sensitive to—but less preconceiving of—what “Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain” (1946) names as “the shadow of an external world” (18).

As I read it, then, “The Snow Man” suggests the possibility of being receptive to the “meaning of the earth”—in the full knowledge of its being “irreducibl[y] strang[e]” (303), as Harold Tolliver describes Steven’s approach to reality in his study of the poet’s treatment of the pastoral. At the heart of my reading of Stevens’ sense of the “meaning of earth” as distinct from Nietzsche’s sense of “*der Sinne der Erde*,” then, is that the poet’s conviction of “irreducible strangeness” is *not* identical to the philosopher’s construction of “a blind, empty, structureless thereness . . . a primal, undifferentiated *Ur-Eine*, a Dionysiac depth.”

In concluding, I return to a famous moment in the early Stevens that has been so often read as Nietzschean: the scene of ecstatic revelry beneath an “old chaos of the sun” that forms the seventh canto of “Sunday Morning.” One might, indeed, be hard-pressed to read this extraordinary scene—reproduced below—as anything other than a vision of Nietzschean power triumphant:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
Their boisterous devotion to the sun  
Not as a god, but as a god might be,  
Naked among them, like a savage source.  
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,

Out of their blood, returning to the sky.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, for Bloom, it is “the image of Zarathustra’s solar trajectory in Nietzsche which dominates here” (43). Although he does not say so, Bloom may well have precisely in mind the moment in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* when its prophet-hero rejects the somnolent morality of the “old [law] table,” encouraging his listeners to laughingly fashion anew their own rules to live by:

Thus did my wise longing, born in the mountains, cry and laugh in me; a wild  
wisdom, verily!—my great pinion-rustling longing.

And oft did it carry me off and up and away and in the midst of laughter; then  
flew I quivering like an arrow with sun-intoxicated rapture:

—Out into distant futures, which no dream hath yet seen, into warmer souths than  
ever sculptor conceived,—where gods in their dancing are ashamed of all clothes.

(240)

The parallels between the final lines of this passage from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and stanza VII of “Sunday Morning” are striking—sufficient to prompt speculation that Stevens may have misremembered the date of his first reading of Nietzsche’s text. Even so, there are notable differences, the most immediate to stanza VII being that whereas Zarathustra finds himself carried “off and up and away” by his ecstasy, only the song of Stevens’ “turbulent” worshipers returns to the sky: the singers themselves remain emphatically earthbound and we are told that each will perish there like the dew. Indeed, that stanza VII thus ends by drawing the mind’s eye down from sky to earth prepares the reader for the “downward to darkness” gravitational pull of

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<sup>19</sup> Longenbach is a rare dissenter: “Imagined in the world of 1915, this is not so much hedonism as desperation” (75).

the poem's conclusion.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, when Zarathustra speaks of his "great pinion-rustling longing," he is figuring himself as an eagle—something he does repeatedly over the course of his narrative—who is, alongside a lion and a serpent, a beloved companion on his lonely road. Notably, these creatures are all predators: figurations of animal power at its zenith. How different is "Sunday Morning" whose many creatures are the meeker ones of the earth: swallows and hinds, boys and maidens, quail and pigeons, even the chanting men, who, notwithstanding the supple turbulence of their limbs and boisterousness of their song, are destined vanish like the dew. Although the "holy hush of ancient sacrifice" (I) has been thoroughly renounced, the "old chaos of the sun" in which we find ourselves at poem's end is a vision of the wild near to pastoral in its peace and temperate loveliness:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail  
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries:  
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;  
And, in the isolation of the sky,  
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make  
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,  
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Despite its pastoral tone, both Leggett and Bloom read this final tableau of "unsponsored" beast

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<sup>20</sup> My point here is perhaps compromised somewhat by Stevens' peculiar flexibility on the ordering and even content of "Sunday Morning" for its first publication by Harriet Munroe in *Poetry*.

and bird as Nietzschean. For Leggett, “Sunday Morning” ends with a celebration of “the essential qualities of becoming . . . beauty, spontaneity, ambiguity, transiency, isolation, and the final affirmation of death” (117). Gesturing to deeper theoretical affinities with Nietzsche, Bloom judges,

There are no causes, only temporal effects, in this concluding topos, where the ripening is all and where the extended wings of the evening birds have ambiguous significances but no actual meanings. Resemblances have receded here, because the tropes turn only from previous tropes. (35)

Like *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “Sunday Morning,” and specifically the opening verses of its eighth stanza, begin with a prophetic affirmation of the death of God: “The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering. / It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.” Yet, Stevens’ concluding image of timid pigeons finding the shelter of their roosts as twilight deepens is worlds away from one of Zarathustra’s final Promethean exultations as a new day dawns: “Mine eagle is awake and like me honoureth the sun. With eagle-talons doth it grasp at the new light” (399). There is little of Nietzschean affirmation in Stevens’ culminating vision of the beauty enabled by death—a vision of beauty whose evident “trajectory” is not upward in ecstasy, but downward in elegy.

Inscribed in the measured cadences of “Sunday Morning,” therefore, but especially in the pervasive gentleness of all its figurations—including those of “mother” death herself—is a spirit which might be read as *contra*-Nietzsche. Indeed, in Stevens’ image of pigeons sinking “downward to darkness, on extended wings,” one might well read *submission* to that which Zarathustra reviles as the “spirit of gravity, and all that it created: constraint, law, necessity and

consequence and purpose” (241). Indeed, I propose that the concluding stanza to “Sunday Morning” may in its *entirety* assert the constraint, law, necessity, and consequence of this “grave” spirit. While the “spontaneous” calls of the quail might seem to herald a Nietzschean freedom from “actual meaning,” as Bloom suggests, these and the “sweet berries ripening in the wilderness” arguably convey a message most “actual” and most constraining: that the present sweet beauties of the earth will soon and *necessarily* “give [up] their bounty” to mother death.<sup>21</sup>

Leggett’s Nietzschean interpretation of “Sunday Morning” as being “about the two most fundamental ways of conceiving of human life, the opposition of being and becoming”(128), undoubtably enriches our understanding of the poem. However, his privileging of the term “becoming,” with its associations of the ecstatically Dionysian, imposes a tonal shift on “Sunday Morning” that is radically distorting. While I dissent from Helen Vendler’s acerbic dismissal of the “exquisite cadences” of the poem as “corpse-like, existing around the woman’s desires in a waxy perfection of resignation” (57), I concur with her description of it as one of Stevens’ “fugal requiems.” It is, I believe, worth emphasizing the obvious fact that “Sunday Morning” is set on the Sabbath and, furthermore, that Stevens likely kept at least a residue of reverence for that once holy day. That he may even have hungered after this lost holiness is suggested by a journal entry made some nine years before he composed “Sunday Morning”: “I wish that groves *still* were sacred—or, at least, that something was: that there was still something free from doubt, that day unto day still uttered speech, and night unto night still showed wisdom. I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct of faith” (L 86, italics retained). While “Sunday Morning” looks forward to

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<sup>21</sup> Note Vendler’s comparison with Keats.

the possibility of a new dispensation of earth-bound belief with certain joy—as its Nietzschean figuration of “boisterous devotion to the sun” reveals—it also looks back in wistful farewell to the majestic certainties of Christianity in which “day unto day utter[ed] speech and night unto night reveal[ed] knowledge” (Psalm 19). Indeed, something of precisely these liturgical cadences may remain in the gathering twilight that concludes “Sunday Morning.”

Four years after “Sunday Morning,” Stevens would compose “Ploughing on Sunday,” whose “exuberant violation of piety” (Leggett 145)—in its depiction of labouring on the Sabbath but especially in what may be a cheeky riff on the *Te Deum* in its self-delighting caroling of “Tum-ti-tum, Ti-tum-tum-tum!”—Nietzsche would doubtless have approved. “Sunday Morning,” however, seems less interested in disrupting pieties than in marking the hesitant beginning—so hesitant that it ends not with a new dawn, as does *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, but at dusk—of Stevens’ difficult search for “satisfactions of belief.” For him these satisfactions would be found not in the *Übermensch*’s transcendence of the ostensible object of devotion, the earth, but rather in his perpetual search of “a possible for its possibleness”—for the ever-elusive “essential poem at the center of things . . . [t]he light of [which] is not a light apart, up-hill” (“Primitive Like An Orb,” I, vi). The eloquent calibrations of this late poem contrast to the hyperbolic reversals of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” and yet the earlier poem—which is the subject of my next, and final, chapter—arguably shows a similar commitment to humbly earthbound efforts at will-full illumination.

Chapter V: Thus Spake Good Clown Crispin (and his four chits)

. . . what can all this matter since  
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?

So may the relation of each man be clipped.

(“The Comedian as the Letter C”)

In each chapter so far, I have treated poems of Stevens that, with only a few exceptions, have been the subject of powerful Nietzschean readings, that is, readings that illuminate Stevens’ poems by explicit and sustained recourse to Nietzsche’s thought, above all to his perspectivism. In keeping with Nietzsche’s own critique of causality, the critics I have considered take pains to eschew the concept of influence, and Stevens’ literary practice, in any event, tends to make any case for influence tenuous. Instead, these critics have made recourse to the concepts of *affinity* (in which Stevens’ and Nietzsche’s texts are held to be mutually illuminating due to significant commonalities) and *intertext* (in which a text by Stevens is completed by the active engagement of a reader drawing upon a text, or texts, by Nietzsche), a mode of interpretation that B. J. Leggett evokes with the suggestive title of his opening chapter, “Nietzsche Reading Stevens.”<sup>1</sup>

As Leggett observes, drawing on Nietzsche’s texts to provide an intertext has forceful and destabilizing implications:

The literary intertext, that is, brings with it its own body of commentary, a complication that in many cases—most, perhaps—has only minor consequences for practical criticism. Yet in the case of writings such as those of Nietzsche that have attracted what

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<sup>1</sup> See Leggett, esp 20-29, drawing upon Roland Barthes and Michael Riffaterre.

Bloom (following Nietzsche's genealogical practice) would call "strong" interpretations, the consequences may be considerable. This is not because Nietzsche's commentators like Danto, Nehamas, and Deleuze have produced a "knowledge" that is applicable to Stevens but because their strong interpretations provide perspectives that open Stevens' Nietzschean texts to new readings. An intertext, like any text, does not simply present itself as material to be interpreted. It is, in the idiom of post-structuralism, always already interpreted, and the "meaning" of a text that incorporates a Nietzschean intertext could presumably shift for any reader who encountered new Nietzschean commentaries.

(153)

Certainly, as I indicate in preceding chapters, there are new, relatively "strong" readings of Nietzsche – from feminist and ecological points of view, for instance – that are making possible the shifts of meaning that Leggett anticipated. Yet Leggett's formulation of the scenarios by which meaning can shift in the Stevens' texts that incorporate a Nietzschean intertext posits an unnecessary – and presumably unjustifiable – passivity on the part of Stevens' texts: they await the fulfillment of "stronger" readings of Nietzsche.

My approach in this chapter is somewhat different, for there appears to be no explicitly Nietzschean reading of "The Comedian as the Letter C": Leggett does not even mention the poem, and Bloom finds no more Nietzschean intertext in it than what is required to read it as Stevens' shameful, tail-between-his-legs declaration of his failure to be the strong Nietzschean artist that America needs. The only substantial reading of "The Comedian as the Letter C" with any affinity to the Nietzschean readings of Stevens' early work that I have surveyed above is offered by Michael Beehler in his *T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and the Discourses of Difference*



(1987). Here, in a brief but compelling analysis, Beehler finds “The Comedian as the Letter C” to affirm a deconstructive understanding of poetry as polyphonic echoes without source, signifiers with none transcendent, “a world of words to the end of it”—“description without place.”

I allude to Stevens’ convocation poem from the summer of 1945—discussed at some length in my first chapter—because it is in fact Beehler’s earlier reading of “Description Without Place,” in an essay from 1977, that makes clearer the Nietzschean dimensions of his reading of “The Comedian as the Letter C.” Observing a pervasive tendency to read Stevens’ poetry as “descriptive” – that is, as presupposing “an ideal presence which is both the generating origin and ultimate foundation of poetry; a non-metaphoric, asymptotical, and external referent” (242) – Beehler anticipates both Miller and Riddel in arguing that “Description Without Place” demonstrates Stevens’ commitment to “overturn[ing] the notion of poetry as a description and language as representation” (243). For Beehler, then, as for later Nietzschean readers of Stevens, that poem’s arresting vignette of Nietzsche’s “gildering” reverie finds the poet insisting, unambiguously, that “it is repeated interpretation, the ‘perpetual’ placing of empty names into new relationships with each other, that provides these names with the fiction of hidden depth, in the same way that the revolution of colored discs creates the illusion of presence of whole, white light” (253). Such a vision directly underlies Beehler’s reading of “The Comedian as the Letter C” as a Nietzschean paean to “the essential heterogeneity of truths and on their strictly local, differential significance” (109). According to Beehler, Stevens’ first long poem “provides the wading reader no place to stand that is not at once the trope of a bottom and a distorting interference” (106).

For Beehler, “The Comedian as the Letter C” sails out upon “the sea of trope” (107), and though its hero Crispin makes landfall several times, neither he – nor his readers – ever find “a core of profound meaning, [nor] place to stand” (100) – however earnestly they might seek these things. Implied throughout Beehler’s reading of the poem is the conviction that Crispin’s experience (and ours, as well, as readers) prefigures Stevens’ thesis in the final canto of “Description Without Place” that “It is a world of words to the end of it, / In which nothing solid is its solid self” (vii, 5-6). As Beehler puts it in his reading of the earlier poem, “[s]ince it is always ‘without place,’ description is not a revelation of anything beyond itself. It is only an internally-reflective system of vacant names, an ‘artificial thing’ with no referent beyond the structure of its own seemings.... [i]t is a tautologous circle” (257). As Beehler reads it, Crispin’s search for a new land in which his imagination might dwell finds not solid earth, but merely another “poetic bottom” which, like all such bottoms, “echo[es] the polyphonic difference that washes over and dissolves their literal identity” (100).

Yet there is more to this Nietzschean intertext than has met the eye so far, for Beehler’s reading implicitly positions Stevens as affirming Nietzschean perspectivism as an accurate description of the human condition. That is, as Beehler presents “The Comedian as the Letter C,” it functions as a revelation of something beyond itself: the human condition. It is a description *with* place in human experience; its language has a referent: our experience in signs. As such, Beehler’s reading indirectly serves to highlight another Nietzschean intertext within Stevens’ poem. As Leggett points out, Nehamas’ reading of Nietzsche suggests that Nietzsche himself worked out a strategy to deal with the apparent contradiction of affirming as truth that there can be no affirmation of truth.

With this problem in mind, Leggett asks, “Is there a style appropriate to perspectivism?” (160). He points out that “Nehamas has argued convincingly that in Nietzsche’s writings the doctrine does indeed carry stylistic implications, although it dictates not one exclusive style but a plurality of styles” (160). According to Nehamas, “Nietzsche’s effort to create an artwork out of himself, a literary character who is a philosopher, is . . . his effort to offer a positive view without falling back into the dogmatic tradition he so distrusted and from which he may never have been sure he escaped” (Nehamas 8; Leggett 161). As Leggett explains, “Nietzsche’s problem, in short, is that he wishes to argue for a position without suggesting at the same time that this position is ‘true,’ a statement about the nature of reality” (161). And so, according to Leggett and Nehamas, “The effect of his many styles is to deny the possibility of a ‘single, neutral language’ in which views of the world could be presented, and his constant presence as an author through his extravagant style demonstrates that ‘theories are as various and idiosyncratic as the writings in which they are embedded’” (Leggett 161, Nehamas 37).

One can observe, then, that Beehler’s reading indirectly spies out the same strategy at work in “The Comedian as the Letter C”: “Stevens writes Crispin’s romantic quest for poetry’s insoluble *ding an sich* only to parasitize it, only, that is, to interrupt it and deploy it as a problem” (106). Recalling Stevens’ oft-cited description of the poem as “anti-mythological” (*L*, 778), Beehler finds “The Comedian as the Letter C” to constitute “a parasitic erosion of the myth of poetry’s profundity and of the essence of univocal meaning that lies within the depths of its words” (100). Enacting this “parasitic erosion,” Stevens creates an artwork out of himself (Vendler and Bloom certainly read the poetry as autobiography), doing so by creating two personae – one, a philosopher, the other an anonymous narrator – neither of whom is identical

with Stevens. One effect of the dramatic interplay between the points of view of Crispin and the narrator is to affirm the Nietzschean perspectivism that Beehler's reading – as enhanced by the work of Leggett and Nehamas – documents.

Another effect is to remind readers of “The Comedian as the Letter C” that what they learn therein is not the truth, but points of view. The reading of Nietzsche by Nehamas and the reading of Stevens by Leggett combine to allow us to read Beehler as revealing a Nietzschean intertext according to which Stevens' extravagant style in “C” is a Nehamasian / Nietzschean creation. Projecting himself both as a literary character who is a philosopher and as a literary character who is a narrator, Stevens performs an implicitly parodic exercise the purpose of which is to offer the positive statement that there are no facts, only interpretations – yet without doing so dogmatically. So it is apparently reference without referent in every way: the poem affirms that language can have no referent, and the extravagance of the voices that Stevens invents acknowledges that the poem's Nietzschean, poststructural affirmations cannot be located in a stable, sincere identity, for there is no affirmation without perspective (I use the word “without” advisedly).

Such might be our conclusion on the basis of an analysis of the poem's logic. Yet, like any poem, this poem contains more than logic. That is, it contains emotions and feelings—not only those of the philosopher Crispin whose voyage is narrated, but also those of the narrator so vitally engaged in the story of Crispin. Whatever he thinks of Crispin's story, the narrator is also undeniably affected by it – and affected sincerely by it, it would seem. In the poem's whirl of references without referents that Beehler so helpfully documents, it is nonetheless possible to identify a relatively stable core of feeling. For all of Crispin's faults, limitations, and weaknesses,

the narrator *likes* Crispin; he likes Crispin's domestic world of vulgar, common, feminine things; he likes Crispin's decision to accept that there is a reality without description – *without*, that is, in the sense of “outside of” or “beyond” description.

Although this meaning of *without* is now generally regarded as relatively archaic, it is hardly beyond our ken, and it was certainly not beyond the ken of Stevens. As I argued in Chapter I, when the meaning of *without* as “outside of” and “beyond” is allowed to inflect a reading of “Description Without Place,” certain aspects of that poem appear to affirm referentiality. Understanding the phrase “description without place” to indicate an understanding of “description” as being beyond and outside of, and thereby proximate to, place, for instance, makes sense of the poem's claim that description should be “a little different from reality” (v 11). Such phrases affirm a belief in “the referent” – if only as a residue, trace, or kind of ancestral memory. Such a valuation of the *experience* of place – the emotional, physical, affective experience of place – even as we are always already outside it and beyond it – is, I think, fundamental to the movement and shape of Crispin's comic quest.

In short, “The Comedian as the Letter C” complicates a most sophisticated Nietzschean intertext of *thought* about the human condition with an equally sophisticated Stevensian text of *feeling* about the human condition. While it is true, as Beehler observes, that the poem repeatedly discards “a cognitive core” (109) – if this is how we understand the various, succeeding material places in which Crispin's imagination might have taken root, if given time, and upon which the reader might have grounded the poem's persistent “turns of trope” (108) – it does not necessarily follow from this that the poem abjures altogether an interest in – let alone the possibility of – “a cognitive core.” While the poem is clearly designed, from one point of view, to keep its readers

from gaining the single, coherent perspective of a transcendental signifier's high ground, from another point of view Stevens' bumptious tale about a burgher from Bordeaux who comes west across the stormy Atlantic in search of a new world in which his imagination might dwell is just as clearly determined to pose emotional, felt sincerity as supplement to a world in which it is impossible to conceive of a word's sincerely representing its referent. The poem's ultimately quite generous treatment of Crispin's quest attributes to place a degree of significance beyond that of a mere fictional construct.

And so, in "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens arguably supplements the Nietzschean intertexts feelingly. Stevens does not necessarily thereby assert that emotion, feeling, affect is without – outside (*hors de*) – signs (this aspect of the poem cannot necessarily be read as a suggestion by Stevens that emotions and feelings presuppose a subject as transcendental signifier), but he clearly shows that the narrator's feelings contradict what are otherwise the poem's affirmations of the Nietzschean intertexts described above. The narrator supports, perhaps even endorses, Crispin's poststructurally reactionary abdication of his Nietzschean responsibilities. Stevens clearly implies, that is, that at least for his narrator there is more to the human condition than is dreamt of in Nietzschean intertexts.

#### Capstone or Imaginative Failure?

Robert Buttel suggests that Stevens composed "The Comedian as the Letter C" "as the final flourish for [*Harmonium*], as a long virtuoso piece" (247). Similarly James Longenbach regards the poem as the "capstone" (94) to Stevens' first collection of poems, for which he very

nearly chose the alternate title, *The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae*. Such claims might seem to run up against Crispin's apparently limited capacities as both colonist and poet. But as Daniel Fuchs observes, Stevens "makes clear at the outset that he is a small, sometimes playful, kind of organ voice. Whatever his stateliness, whatever his gaiety, it all stems from the modern attempt at making a modest appraisal of human life" (157-58). And of course, for Stevens, modesty had its own greatness. Who better to "cap" such a collection of grandly humble minutiae than Crispin, in whom both a certain appropriately comic grandeur and decided modesty coexist?

For two of Stevens' most venerable critics, however, the answer seems to have been *not* the 'aspiring clown,' one-time burgher of Bordeaux. That Crispin's aspiration takes him straight into domesticity—a wife and children and "cream for the fig and silver for the cream"—and seemingly straight out of poetry, is a trajectory mourned by both Vendler and Bloom.<sup>2</sup> Vendler regards "The Comedian" as "a tale of false attempts and real regrets, which presumes intellectually on its felt satisfactions, asserting an ironic benignity it cannot render without revulsion, refusing to acknowledge an asceticism it cannot hide" (54). Bloom, by contrast, reads not error, but exhaustion in Crispin's fate. That the search by Stevens' comic hero for a new continent in which his imagination might dwell should ultimately find him in a "nice shady cabin" surrounded by his curly-headed "chits" confirms, for Bloom, Crispin's (that is, Stevens') inability to "expand in force and freedom. . . . [sufficient] . . . to represent the transcendental selfhood not present in his European origins and awaiting him in America" (78). For both Vendler and Bloom, Crispin's vaunted ambition, expressed in Canto IV, to "drive away / The

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<sup>2</sup> While Bloom suggests that "The Comedian as the Letter C" can be read as "either the crown or the exasperation of *Harmonium*" (70), he evidently conceives it as the latter.

shadow of his fellows from the skies, / And, from their stale intelligence released, / To make a new intelligence prevail,” comes to naught, and is a failure which presages Steven’s own much remarked upon entry into almost complete poetic silence until 1933.

For Vendler, Stevens’ descriptions of Crispin, an innocent abroad, first among the lusty “beak and bud and fruity gobbet-skins” of the Yucatan and then in the midst of the “rumbling bottomness” of conjugal bliss and the consequent “din and gobble” of children, betray “the fastidious shudder of the involuntary ascetic” (46). Describing what she believes to be her poet’s proper path, she writes, “Stevens repudiates fertility in favor of discreet fineness; his gift above all others was to see, both comically and tragically, that ‘fluttering things have so distinct a shade’” (46). Further on, she observes (rightly, I believe) how “Stevens’ best verse trembles always at halfway points, at the point of metamorphosis, when day is becoming darkness, when winter is becoming spring, when the rock is becoming the ivy, when a shadowy myth takes form before dissolving, when the revolving *mundo* hesitates in a pause” (47).

Seeking to explain why Stevens would “pursue the *ignis fatuus* of luxuriance” in “The Comedian,” when his “true instincts were for [the earth’s] austerities and . . . dilapidations” (45), Vendler suggests the poem as part of a pervasive pattern in which “Stevens’ resolute attempts to make himself into a ribald poet of boisterous devotion to the gaudy, the gusty, and the burly are a direct consequence of a depressing irony with respect to the self he was born with and an equally depressing delusion about the extent to which the self can be changed” (52). As “an exercise in stressed physicality and stressed tropicality,” “The Comedian” is, according to Vendler, one of the many poems in *Harmonium* that contribute to the collection’s intermittent air of “a strained Dionysian *tripudium*” (52). Alongside “Life is Motion” and “Ploughing on Sunday” which



Vendler names as “classic instances” of Stevens’ laboured turns to a more corporeal idiom, one might place such poems as “Decorations for Bananas” and “The Jack-Rabbit.” But these, and the handful of other such moments of “stressed physicality” which crop up in *Harmonium*, hardly amount to a sustained straining towards a poetics of ribald ecstasy. No doubt a certain ambivalence towards his rather staid bourgeois self did contribute to early attempts by Stevens to profess an inner Whitman—as when he chose to rearrange “Sunday Morning” for its first printing such that the poem ended with its “supple and turbulent . . . ring of men” chanting their “boisterous” solar devotions. But Stevens’ restoration of the poem’s original order for its inclusion in *Harmonium* goes some way in confirming that a more mature Stevens had come to accept that his poetic self was not at ease sounding a “barbaric yawp.”

My suggestion that Stevens would have thus “worked through” his poetic insecurities about *not* being a luxuriant “kosmos,” after the manner of Whitman, would no doubt strike Bloom as both woefully naive and entirely ignorant of the psyche of “strong poets.” As he puts it in *Anxiety of Influence*, “To equate emotional maturation with the discovery of acceptable substitutes [to sublimate desire] may be pragmatic wisdom . . . but this is not the wisdom of the strong poets. The surrendered dream is not merely a phantasmagoria of endless gratification, but is the greatest of all human illusions, the vision of immortality” (9). Where Vendler identifies Stevens’ “excessively interior” vision of the world, a product of a visceral repulsion away from “the provocations of the senses” (45), as personal to the poet, Bloom locates Stevens’ “world overinternalized” within “a broad movement of post-Enlightenment consciousness” (76). Thus he speaks of Stevens’ “long and largely hidden civil war with the major poets of English and American romanticism—Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Emerson, and Whitman” (ibid 12). For

Bloom, “The Comedian as the Letter C” is a poem about Stevens’ desire to write “poems of his climate,” as an American Romantic. The poet is thwarted in his determination to “drive away the shadow of his fellows from the skies,” however, because he is imaginatively exhausted by his “anxious” battle with his strong poet forebears. To confront the “heightened reality” of the American climate Stevens needed “a visionary capacity for response” (85, 86). For Bloom, Stevens had shown such capacity in a poem like “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” and would have to do so again in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” but not until he triumphed over the malady of belatedness.

For Vendler, “The Comedian as the Letter C” is “veiled autobiography, the semi-ironic confessional” (54). Concurring, but in a typically more florid idiom, Bloom argues that Stevens understood Crispin’s journey as the “odyssey of his own soul,” and that in his self-identification with a descendant of the foolish braggart who sought (and failed to win) Horace’s poetic crown, Stevens “court[ed], quite deliberately, a poetic suicide” (71-72). For both Bloom and Vendler, then, the abounding parody in this “capstone” to *Harmonium* was largely self-directed. Both critics use the term “bitter” to describe a poem that others have read in a gentler light, certainly with a sense of greater pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

But one need not follow Vendler and Bloom in recoiling from Crispin’s “return to social nature.” Indeed, a determination to accept Crispin’s endpoint in “A Nice Shady Cabin” (Canto V) amid “Daughter With Curls” (Canto VI) on its own terms—which means acknowledging the

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Guereschi’s early reading of the poem (1964) suggests its satire to be directed “against the venerated myth of the American Adam” (72) : “Mockingly described as the ‘Socrates of snails,’ he ludicrously confronts the unknown terrors once assigned to the Promethean heroes of *Moby Dick* and *Leatherstocking*” (73).

moments of praise (and these *are* present) alongside those of parody—allows readings that are fundamentally more faithful to the poem’s “cloudy drift.” Nowhere is this more evidently the case than in the conclusion to Canto V in which the narrator, after conceding that “the quotidian saps philosophers / And men like Crispin like them in intent, / If not in will, to track the knaves of thought,” goes on to insist, “But the quotidian composed as his [Crispin’s]”—that is, a quotidian composed of the happy pleasures of his breakfast table, his garden, and his marriage bed—

the quotidian

Like this, saps like the sun, true fortuneer.

For all it takes it gives a humped return

Exchequering from piebald fisci unkeyed.

Both syntax and images here entangle and confuse and have not surprisingly produced an extraordinary range of readings.<sup>4</sup> While Riddel discerns a bawdy pun at work in “humped return,” and may well be right, the more immediate vehicle is surely a heap of coins which has grown from the patchwork thrift of pennies and dimes held in a fisc (in North American idiom, the state treasury), to the resplendent golden holdings of an exchequer.<sup>5</sup> Whatever we are able to make of such a baroque image, its basic message is clear: Crispin’s quotidian, “like the sun” to the earth, gives light and life to his world. Given the centrality of the sun in Stevens’ imaginative pantheon, it is difficult to conceive this as an image suggestive of bitterness, just as it is difficult

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Comins, 156-57, and Murphy, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Here, then, “piebald” may be punning against “exchequer,” a term which derives from the checked cloth formerly used on counting tables in the English royal treasury.

generally to accept judgements on “The Comedian as the Letter C” as a fundamentally “bitter” text.<sup>6</sup> Not only does such an epithet ignore the poem’s title outright, but it denies the poem’s evident, often giddily bumptious, delight in parody.

That “The Comedian as the Letter C” is, at least intermittently, a parodic *tour de force* is widely acknowledged, with its most commonly suggested targets being central texts in American and British Romanticism. Though he finds only anxiety, and no delight, in such a relation, Bloom identifies Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” as important precursor texts for Stevens’ poem. He also follows Vendler in identifying as critical in the poem’s genealogy Shelley’s “Alastor, or, the Spirit of Solitude,” whose Poet hero “can tolerate neither nature nor other selves and who voyages until he dies, a victim of his own visionary intensity” (70). That Shelley’s poem should have been elected as the likely chief progenitor of “The Comedian” is not unreasonable, as there are certain structural parallels between the two texts. Crispin, like Shelley’s hero, leaves hearth and home, “To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands,” and he, too, gets bashed about as the “the multitudinous streams / Of ocean’s mountainous waste to mutual war / Rus[h] in dark tumult thundering.” And Stevens’ hero, like Alastor, finds himself upriver at one point. And the gaiety and over-the-top eroticism which intermittently bursts forth from “The Comedian” might be read as burlesquing the melancholy morbidity that flows through “Alastor.” Perhaps this idea informs Longenbach’s own support for the notion that Stevens’ poem may be read as an ironic riposte to Shelley’s text.

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking here of Cook’s reading of this trope as an undoing of Milton’s “many a man and many a maid / Dancing in the chequer’d shade,” where “humped” and “piebald” function as “grim revisions of ‘dancing’ and ‘chequer’d shade’” (83).

For Longenbach, as for other readers, “Alastor” functions more as a representative, than an actual, source for Crispin’s journey.<sup>7</sup> In Longenbach’s assessment, “Alastor” belongs to a tradition of apocalyptic narratives which Stevens was, in the wake of the First World War, determined to reject as solipsistic and self-aggrandizing. As Longenbach reads it, Stevens was determined that his post-war poem would eschew the neurotic and *not* present an “apocalypse of the self, a new world revealed by a new vision,” and thus he has his Crispin ultimately “sai[l] into an extraordinary mildness, to a place where continuities are affirmed,” and commends his “self-conscious rejection of all manner of apocalyptic rhetoric” (93).

Longenbach is right to insist upon Stevens’ refusal of the apocalyptic mode, upon the poet’s requirement for “plain sense.” Such a modest, elliptical, and muted demeanour expresses itself again and again in Stevens’ poetry, a rhetorical stance well suited to “searc[h] a possible for its possibleness” in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949), to “speak humanly from the height or from the depth of human things” in “Chocorua to Its Neighbor” (1943), to “share the confusions of intelligence” and “increase the aspects of experience,” in “Reply to Papini”(1942). As one who would declare, “Amen to the feelings about familiar things,” in “Montrachet-le-Jardin” (1942), Stevens was evidently temperamentally at home in burgherly moderation. I concur absolutely then with Longenbach’s contention that “Crispin’s self-conscious rejection of all manner of apocalyptic rhetoric is no sign of Stevens’ failure of imagination” (93).

In his 1940 interpretation of “The Comedian” as an allegory of the poetic imagination’s passage from romanticism to realism, which Stevens famously praised as being “correct, not only

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<sup>7</sup> See, however, Longenbach’s insight into Stevens’ Harvard sonnets as telling the story of “Alastor” “in miniature” (93).

in the main but in particular, and not only correct but keen” (L 350), Hi Simons judged Crispin to end an “indulgent fatalist” and sceptic (98). There have been strenuous demurrals from this judgement, but Crispin’s final equanimity amid chits and figs, quilts and cream, and his avowed disinclination to make much of anything else besides, supports Simons’ reading.<sup>8</sup> My contention is that Stevens meant to affirm Crispin as a figure of equable moderation. Vendler observes in *Words Chosen out of Desire* (1984), that Stevens’ poems give frequent voice to “wintry feelings of apathy, reduction, nakedness, and doubt” (37). Although not itself a poem of winter, “The Comedian” attests to the fact that summer’s lease is short. By the end of his journey, Crispin knows that the “meaning of the earth” requires his incremental diminishment and ultimate dissolution in dark cold. At the beginning of his tale, and some considerable distance through it, however, Crispin moves westward chasing the sun, a comical *Übermensch*-in-training, as it were, desperately willing to take on something of its warmth and light and regenerative power.

#### The Soil and Man’s Intelligence.

Though composed of six cantos of approximately equivalent length, “The Comedian as the Letter C” can be understood as a poem of two halves, each half beginning on a “note” of seemingly unequivocal affirmation. Introducing the first three cantos of the poem, and arguably governing their progress, is the pithy observation, “Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil” (1). In a seeming reversal of the poem’s opening statement, however, the first line of the fourth canto

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Bloom and Cervo.

will then declare, “Nota: his soil is man’s intelligence”—a judgment which I read as guiding the events and sentiment of the last three cantos of the poem. While of course making no claims for direct correspondence between “The Comedian as the Letter C” and Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, it is, I think, worth pointing out their shared obsession with meditating on “the meaning of the earth” as a locus for aesthetic and philosophical power. It is with such common ground in mind that I understand the first three cantos of the poem to show the narrator comically relating the tribulations that his anti-hero Crispin endures as he tries—and fails—to *be* “the intelligence of his soil”—as if this “Socrates / Of snails” (I, 2-3) had himself once read Zarathustra urging his disciples to “*be* the meaning of the earth” (I, xxii, 2) and thereby achieve the rank of *Urbemensch*.

There are, in fact, a number of intriguing, if ultimately coincidental, parallels between the two texts. For example, the heroes of both texts have roots in antiquity: Crispin in the third century St. Crispin, patron saint of shoe-makers, and Zarathustra in the ancient Iranian prophet, Zoroaster. And neither hero inhabits his antique time: Crispin embarks on a seventeenth-century voyage, and Zarathustra’s world, although intermittently suggestive of the medieval, seems for the most part located quite firmly in the modern period. More significant, as we shall see, is the fact that in “The Comedian as the Letter C,” no less than in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, earth and sea, sun and moon, thunder and lightning play critical—and critically similar—roles in the story unfolding. So Zarathustra says, “Verily, like the sun I do love life, and all deep seas. And this meanth *to me* knowledge” (II, xxxvii). The natural imagery in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is cast explicitly as an epistemological allegory. In “The Comedian,” too, the same natural polarities—earth and sea, sun and moon—and couplings—thunder and lightning—are crucial

points not just of an unfolding story but of philosophical reflection. Indeed, perhaps the most significant parallel is the fact that Crispin is inspired by his voyaging to “the idea of a colony,” while Zarathustra dreams rapturously of “a living plantation for my thoughts,” as he puts it in Book III of his tale. In the context of planning to make their “new intelligence[s] prevail,” both Crispin and Zarathustra spend a good deal of time debunking received wisdom. Both “The Comedian” and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, then, are philosophical-poetical allegories in which each respective protagonist’s *progressive* spiritual journey celebrates his movement away from an outmoded philosophical position: the itinerant Zarathustra preaches especially against Kantian Idealism, while Crispin crosses the Atlantic to get away from high Romanticism.<sup>9</sup>

But Nietzsche’s and Stevens’ respective heroes come to radically different ends. Apparently marking no end for Zarathustra himself who will continue wandering in search of his “proper men” (IV, lxxx), his narrative thus far concludes with his proclaiming,

Do I then strive after *happiness*? I strive after my *work*!

Well! The lion hath come, my children are night,

Zarathustra hath grown ripe, mine hour hath come:—

This is *my* morning, my day beginneth: *arise now, arise,*

*thou great noontide!*— (IV, lxxx italics retained)

Upon these words, Zarathustra rises and “le[aves] his cave, glowing and strong, like a morning

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, Nietzsche’s purpose in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* went far beyond an assault on Kant. According to Stanley Rosen, for example, “Whereas Plato as it were establishes Western European history on the basis of philosophy by writing the *Republic*, Nietzsche publishes *Zarathustra* in order to destroy a Western Europe that has been enervated by a deteriorated, historically exhausted Christianity, or Platonism for the masses” (xiv).



sun coming out of the gloomy mountains.” Measured against the romantic sublimity of Nietzsche’s hero, who seems, perhaps, on the verge of willing his own self-surpassing into an *Übermensch*, but who is, in any case, still “launching the arrow of his longing beyond man,” the happy Crispin—“[e]ffective colonizer sharply stopped / In the door-yard by his own capacious bloom” (VI, 25-26) (a “bloom” achieved only at the cost of his own withering)—seems a perfect figure for Zarathustra’s much disparaged “last man.” It is with such a contrast in mind, that my reading of the last three cantos of “The Comedian as the Letter C” finds Stevens’ narrator clearing (and laying) the ground for his own vision of heroic human will, a heroism which begins and ends with a heartfelt deference to human weakness and limits.

That such an insistence on the recognition of limits will be one of the themes of “The Comedian”—even as the poem itself so clearly revels in exceeding the limits of language—is clear the moment we leave behind the all-encompassing sweep of its opening *nota bene*: “man is the intelligence of his soil.” In comically reductive fashion, the narrator then sketches this “sovereign” logos as a petty fiefdom of bureaucratic pedantry: “As such, the Socrates / Of snails, musician of pears, principium / And lex.” The narrator then muses, “Sed quaeritur: is this same wig / Of things, this nincompated pedagogue, / Preceptor to the sea?” In the first version of the poem, “The Journal of Crispin,” which Stevens composed in some haste for submission to a poetry contest in December of 1921, the narrator asks if the pedagogue of earth might not also be “The sceptre of the unregenerate sea.” As Eleanor Cook notes, “unregenerate sea” is here a most pointed phrase, suggesting that this ocean waste has defied the apocalyptic prophesy of Revelations 21.1 which states that following the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth, there

shall be no more sea.<sup>1</sup> In both poems, the answer to the narrator's query regarding the capacity of this earthy "Socrates" to encompass the sea is a decided negative.

The first thing we are told of our representative pedagogue, Crispin, whom we meet *in medias res* on voyage from Bordeaux to Yucatan, is that he "at sea / Created, in his day, a touch of doubt."<sup>2</sup> His credentials as an evaluator and creator clearly being limited to his mastery of such domestic minutiae as "gelatines and jupes," Crispin with his "barber's eye" seems a most unlikely candidate to become an *Übermensch*, whether at sea or on land. As Morse notes, he "can see the ocean only in the lingo of his trade. As a farmer [of salad beds and apricots] he is wholly unprepared to explain porpoises" (27-28), and so he finds the ocean waves to be "mustachios, / Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world." The humble Crispin finds the material substance of both sea and earth no more knowable than the idea of heaven.<sup>3</sup> And so it is that by the end of the second stanza of Canto I we know Crispin at sea to be utterly *at sea*, a bit of flotsam on the rolling waves. This "nincompated pedagogue" has nothing to teach the sea, no meaning to give its waves. Rather, the ocean has stripped Stevens' neophyte sailor bare of his meaning—his "mythology of self"—in the face of such sublimity.

Closing his description of what is presumably Crispin's first encounter with open ocean, the narrator then asks, "What word split up in cllickering syllables / And storming under

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<sup>1</sup> As a symbol of unrest and perpetual destruction, the sea has no place in the eternal peace of God's kingdom on earth: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea."

<sup>2</sup> Whereas Zarathustra, as the one who announces the death of God to the world, brings about a veritable avalanche of anxiety.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's word for "unknowable" is *Unerforschlichen*, which Hollingdale translates as "inscrutable."

multitudinous tones / Was name for short-shanks in all that brunt?"(i, 29-31). Drawing on his conviction that Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" exerts its inexorable force on "The Comedian," Bloom judges this word to be the American bard's "sweet, low delicious word, death."<sup>4</sup> But this reading seems unlikely given that the term being sought is that which might *name* the short-shanked Crispin. Furthermore, the monosyllable "death" hardly fulfils the criteria given: no amount of tumultuous wave action is going to break *it* apart into "clickering syllables." (And indeed, such an immunity to fragmentation or dissolution is surely essential to Whitman's own imaginative investment in the word.) In one of the few other attempts to read Stevens' riddling here, Cook points out that "clicker" itself is a term for both a foreman shoemaker and compositor, and suggests further that "shank" is a term likewise common to both shoemaking and printing. As the letter C made small, made "short-shanked" by the storm, the name for Crispin "in all that brunt" is "minuscule" (81). Cook's reading is attractive, save that it is difficult to relate "minuscule" to "multitudinous storming" as the poem requires. Is it possible that the word for that which roils and storms around poor Crispin—waiting to christen our poor comic hero—might, indeed, be *Übermensch*?

Whatever it may be, the word that "storms under multitudinous tones," so much at odds with the meagre "short shanks" of common man, is surely a word of inflated language, a word that expresses a grandiose claim the narrator wishes to debunk. If so, the bandy-legged Crispin hardly seems at this moment to measure up to any such exulted denomination, feeling instead "washed away by magnitude." Indeed, the only sound remaining in him is the *sound* of the sea (and "C") itself. While Whitman's ghost may well haunt this closing scene, the ocean sound

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<sup>4</sup> Longenbach, too, supports this view.

which envelops Crispin at this juncture is, luckily, not “death,” but the “ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh”(i, 35) of actual waves, against the sides of an actual wooden ship.

Moving on, one of the many other riddles of the poem is why the narrator, having presented Crispin’s radical loss of self-hood when faced with the overwhelming might of the sea, then musingly reflects on whether this “skinny sailor” might be the one to teach economy and austerity to “a wordy, watery age / That whispered to the sun’s compassion, [and] made / A convocation, nightly, of the sea-stars”(i, 40-2), and where one could still glimpse on the horizon,

Triton incomplicate with that  
Which made him Triton, nothing left of him,  
Except in faint, memorial gesturings,  
That were like arms and shoulders in the waves. (44-47)

As Eduard Guereschi once observed, the Triton reference here may owe to Wordsworth’s “The World is Too Much With Us” which ends with the speaker wishing once more to “hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.” Such a reading makes good sense of the “hallucinating horn” (49) which makes its appearance in lines following. But what to make of that strange word, “incomplicate”?

Cook recurs to the now rare sense of this word—that is, *simple*—and from this derives the sense that Triton is here being “unfolded from previous enfoldings, from all those *plis* that have come together to make [his] legend” (81). But this explication, which emphasizes Triton’s existence as a function of narrative, accounts less well for the poem’s emphasis on the body of the God still dimly seen drifting out in the waves and gesturing faintly. Although Stevens was no doubt aware of the proper meaning of “incomplicate,” its rhyming echo with the first word used

to describe Crispin as the representative man, “nincompated” (I, 5), suggests another possible layer of meaning. That is, extrapolating from Cooks’ own intuition that “nincompated” may be a portmanteau word combining “nincompoop” with “addle-pated,” I read “incomplicate” as *non-pated*, and old Triton, therefore, as having lost not his horn but his *head* somewhere in the waves, leaving nothing for Crispin to see but arms and shoulders forlornly gesturing. While Bloom may be correct that Stevens’ tableau here owes something to an image in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” of “white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,” Stevens’ presentation of “arms *and* shoulders” suggests, as Whitman’s image does not, one of the many headless statues from Antiquity.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Stevens’ image of a headless Triton could simply be an extrapolation from Whitman’s trope. Other possibilities emerge, however, when this singular image is placed alongside a moment late in the second book of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, when its wandering prophet irritably debunks “The Poets” (amongst whom he commendably includes himself) as a group of lying and lazy sentimentalists whose superficiality is part and parcel of their vanity. Explaining himself to his disciples who are discountenanced by their poet-prophet’s sudden move to ironize his own project, Zarathustra observes,

[I]f there come unto them tender emotions, then do the poets always think that nature herself is in love with them. . . .

I became weary of the poets, of the old and of the new: superficial are they all unto me, and shallow seas.

They did not think sufficiently into the depth; therefore their feeling did not reach

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth observing that no sea gods appear in Whitman’s poem.

the bottom.

Some sensation of voluptuousness and some sensation of tedium: these have as yet been their best contemplation . . . .

Ah, I cast indeed my net into their sea, and meant to catch good fish; but always did I draw up the head of some ancient God. (II, xxxix)

As he would declare in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche preferred the idiom of the ancients themselves, particularly the odes of Horace, those “lingual mosaic[s] where every word, as sound, as position, and as notion, diffuses its force right, left, and over the whole, that minimum in the compass and number of signs, that maximum thus realized in their energy” (*T*, “My Indebtedness to the Ancients”).

I recall here how Horace was likewise important to one of Crispin’s precursors, the absurdly self-inflated Crispinus of Jonson’s *Poetaster* who tries and fails to seize the crown of poet from the author of *Ars Poetica* after his poetic efforts reveal themselves to be maximum “in the compass and number of signs” while realizing the minimum in terms of their energy. Now while Stevens’ Crispin clearly owes much to Jonson’s Crispinus, is it possible that he also owes something of a debt to Nietzsche? Certainly this scene might be read as heralding (momentary) progress in our hero’s quest to *be* “the intelligence of his soil,” “the meaning of the earth.” That is, having glimpsed the headless Triton out in the waves (Zarathustra having “drawn up the head of [this] ancient god”?), Crispin with a sudden, but as we shall see, premature, seizure of creative will, determines to impose a harder, drier, and generally nobler idiom on an age whose poets narcissistically find “tender emotion” in a compassionate sun, make tedious “convocation . . . of the sea-stars” every night, presumably from easily accessed inter-tidal pools (cf. Zarathustra’s

“shallow seas”). Such determination proves a false dawn, however.

No sooner is the hope of Crispin’s assuming poetic dominion over the “verbose” sea put forward, however, than it is dashed: “the valet in the tempest [is] annulled” (i, 53) by the heretofore placid ocean’s abrupt shift into *Sturm und Drang*, and “Crispin, merest minuscule in the gales, / Dejected his manner to the turbulence.”(i, 56-7). As Cook points out, “minuscule” here could be “a term from printing” with Steven’s hero thus now “a reduced c, with a short shank” (81). But if we read Crispin of the first three cantos as one seeking to be an *Übermensch*, then this scene of our hero “deject[ing] his manner to the turbulence” might be read as an effort to enact the first stage in Zarathustra’s doctrine of the three-fold metamorphosis of the spirit—from camel, through to lion, through to child—that a human must undergo enroute to becoming an *Übermensch*. Explaining the first metamorphosis, Zarathustra asserts that it is the camel, “the load-bearing spirit,” who asks, “What is the heaviest thing, ye heroes? . . . that I may take it upon me and rejoice in my strength. Is it not this: To humiliate oneself in order to mortify one’s pride? To exhibit one’s folly in order to mock at one’s wisdom?” (I, i). Admittedly, Crispin does not so much take up his humiliation as have it thrust upon him as “merest minuscule in the gales.” He seems less “load-bearing,” than crushed, as he endures

the salt [hanging] on his spirit like a frost,  
The dead brine melt[ing] in him like a dew of  
Winter, until nothing of himself  
Remained, except some starker, barer self  
In a starker, barer world. (i, 58- 62)

Nonetheless, there is no denying that a metamorphosis of some kind has happened, and, indeed,

Crispin's turn at sea recalls something of Zarathustra's contention that to be "a camel" is to "love those who despise us, and give one's hand to the phantom when it is going to frighten us" (I i). At one point in Zarathustra's first, and ill-fated, attempt to bring news of the *Übermensch* as "the meaning of the earth" to the world at large, he exhorts a bewildered and increasingly hostile group of burghers, "In truth, man is a polluted river. One must be a sea, to receive a polluted river and not be defiled. Behold, I teach you the superman: he is this sea, in him your great contempt can go under" ("Prologue" iii). Poor Crispin rather finds the sea a contemptuous presence, apparently despising and trying to frighten him: "Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried / Celestial sneering boisterously." (i, 66-7)

Now a "starker, barer self / In a starker, barer world," that is, in a world without imagination as the title of Canto I affirms, Crispin becomes "an introspective voyager." What follows next is likely the most labyrinthine passage, both syntactically and thematically, in the poem:

Here was the veritable ding an sich, at last,  
Crispin confronting it, a vocable thing,  
But with a speech belched out of hoary darks  
Noway resembling his, a visible thing,  
And excepting negligible Triton, free  
From the unavoidable shadow of himself  
That lay elsewhere around him. (i, 69-75)

To attempt to untangle Stevens' meaning at this point is to recall Frank Kermode's assessment of "The Comedian" as being "a narrative of obscurely allegorical intent, harsh and dream-like. . .



[with] its manner . . . a sustained nightmare of unexpected diction, so that one sometimes thinks of it less as a poem than as a remarkably physical feat” (85).

First to confront the reader is the paradoxical phrase, “the veritable ding an sich.” At least according to Kant, who designated the *ding an sich* as synonymous with noumenon and by definition therefore independent of the senses, Stevens would seem to be writing nonsense here. That is, at least according to Kant, Crispin could not “confront” the *ding an sich* as “a vocable thing,” “a visible thing.” But Stevens knew his philosophy and so most carefully precedes “ding an sich” with the word “veritable” and thereby, through the self-reversing properties of the word “veritable,” clarifies his usage of the “thing-in-itself” as metaphorical.<sup>6</sup> But what *is* this “ding an sich” which Crispin “confronts” on his horizon?

No one to my knowledge has ever attempted a full exegesis of Crispin’s “confrontation” with that which is, again, described as having “a speech belched out of hoary darks” and as being with the exception of the “negligible Triton, free / From the unavoidable shadow of himself / That lay elsewhere around him.” To begin to make sense of this strange spectre, one might identify it as approximating an animal, in light of its capacity for communicating via “hoary belchings.” The reference to “negligible Triton” suggests, however, that what Crispin confronts on the high seas is somehow linked to the human, or to the quasi-divine. But how are we to understand Stevens’ bewildering image of a shadow which seems both avoidable and eternally present?

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<sup>6</sup>While the primary meaning of *veritable* is “conformity to truth,” using the word to mean “properly so called,” a secondary meaning—also identified in the OED—actually reverses its own strict meaning (rather like the idiomatic use of *literal* to mean *metaphorical*). So, for example, the statement that there was “a veritable army of backpackers” actually means that there was such a large group of backpackers that it might almost have seemed like an army.

Once again I would suggest *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as an intriguing supplement to “The Comedian as the Letter C,” specifically a moment in a chapter of its second book, titled “The Sublime Ones.” It begins,

Calm is the bottom of my sea: who would guess that it hideth droll monsters!  
Unmoved is my depth: but it sparkleth with swimming enigmas and laughters.

A sublime one saw I to-day, a solemn one, a penitent of the spirit: Oh, how my soul laughed at his ugliness! (II, xxxv).

In his aforementioned disquisition on “The Poets,” Zarathustra uses the term “penitent of the spirit” to describe those commendable few who have become “weary” of their vanity, and who under critical self-examination have rejected their mode of sentimental solipsism and superficiality. While Nietzsche’s prophet does not say so explicitly, it seems, then, that these “sublime ones” whom he draws up from the depth (no poet of the shallows, he!) are themselves poets, though as Zarathustra notes, of decidedly sombre guise:

With upraised breast . . . thus did he stand, the sublime one, and in silence:

O’er hung with ugly truths, the spoil of his hunting and rich in torn raiment: many thorns also hung on him—but I saw no rose.

Not yet had he learned laughing and beauty. Gloomy did this hunter return from the forest of knowledge.

From the fight with wild beasts returned he home: but even yet a wild beast gazeth out of his seriousness—an unconquered wild beast!

As a tiger doth he ever stand, on the point of springing. (Ibid).

While Nietzsche’s prophet evidently admires the courage and strength of this “unconquered”

creature, he ultimately finds him an uncongenial presence too self-engrossed in his own sublimity, and observes that “only when he turneth away from himself will he o’erleap his own shadow—and verily! into *his sun*” (ibid, italics in original).

In the notes which accompany his translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Antony Ludovici glosses this “sublime one” as belonging in his “obdurately sublime and earnest” (419) nature to the camel stage in Zarathustra’s doctrine of metamorphosis, but surely this hunter is more akin to the lion. In his evident stature as king of wild beasts, but especially in his successful slaying of “ugly truths,” this entity has evidently achieved Zarathustra’s second metamorphosis as the lion who has fought and won his battle with the “great dragon” named “Thou-shalt.” It is with this vision in mind of the austere lion who says “a holy Nay even unto duty,” battling the serpent “Thou-shalt,” that I turn back to the scene of the *introspective* Crispin “confronting” some rather fearsome thing-in-itself whose voice is “a speech belched out of hoary darks.” Recalling the peculiar fact that Crispin and his “ding-in-sich” appear to have the shadow of the “negligible Triton” in common, I want to suggest the narrator at this point presents his short-shanked aspirant to the ranks of *Übermensch* as hearing within himself the roar of Zarathustra’s lion. And so also does the poet Crispin *see* himself as this sublime one who, though he still has to “o’erleap his own shadow,” has evidently said a “holy Nay” to a great deal: “Severance / Was clear. The last distortion of romance / Forsook the insatiable egotist.”

In his reading of “The Comedian” as an allegory of the poetic imagination’s passage from romanticism to realism, Hi Simons judges the final moments of Canto I to represent Crispin’s passage into “a realism almost without positive content” from his original miring in a “juvenile romantic subjectivism” (98). As one who can “create [himself] freedom, and give a holy Nay

even unto duty” (27), yet is powerless to “create new values,” Zarathustra’s lion, too, might be described as embodying “a realism without positive content.” And so, also, though Crispin is “made new” by his encounter with (and transformation into) the roaring “thing-in-itself,” he finds himself no longer “the maker”: “The imagination, here, could not evade, / In poems of plums, the strict austerity / Of one vast, subjugating, final tone” (i, 81-3). A rather quiescent king of beasts, in fact, Crispin is left to observe, and this is what he next beholds:

The drenching of stale lives no more fell down.

What was this gaudy, gusty panoply?

Out of what swift destruction did it spring?

It was caparison of wind and cloud

And something given to make whole among

The ruses that were shattered by the large. (84-9)

In his reading of the poem, Simons finds the sea, “that heretofore had been so adverse and terrifying, now enfold[ing] [Crispin] like a beautiful and protective wrap. . . . [having] sacrificed all to reality; now he found that he had all of reality to compensate him” (100). But surely it is something more than “reality” that is compensating Crispin here. In the narrator’s “caparison of wind and cloud,” Simons finds “the glory” of the placid sea following the cessation of the storm. But neither “caparison” nor “panoply,” as terms of military pomp, can be easily conceived as images of tranquility after tempest. Indeed, the “gaudy, gusty panoply” perceived by Crispin seems in fact a resurgence of the storm, or another storm entirely, and so it is that the narrator asks another of his rhetorical questions, “Out of what swift destruction did it spring?”

Recalling the “clickering” and “storming” of earlier lines, I would propose that something

rather different is at work, beginning with the awkward syntax of the narrator's observation that "The drenching of stale lives no more fell down." Admittedly, it is possible that this line refers to "the dead brine" of self in Crispin that has slowly been melting away. "Made new," Crispin has no more "stale lives" in him—not apparently, at any rate. But "drenching" and "fell down" continue to niggle oddly within this explanation, neither seeming appropriate to describe the dwindling of Crispin. What are we to make of what seems in fact an image of downpour from the sky? That Crispin is indeed looking at the sky rather than at the sea, as Simons suggests, is affirmed by the fact that he apprehends this "gusty, gaudy panoply" as a "caparison of wind and *cloud*." And what are we to make of this redoubled martial image being figured as "something given to make whole among / The ruses that were shattered by the large"? Surely there is more than a tinge of irony in having this "swift destruction" so rapidly made the instrument of wholeness. What *is* this "panoply," this "caparison"? What does Crispin see? And what are we to make of closing irony of Canto I where it seems things shatter only to be made whole once again?

Returning first to the narrator's cryptic observation that "[t]he drenching of stale lives no more fell down," I propose that this image, together with the "gusty, gaudy panoply" that Crispin witnesses on the horizon, may compose a vision of the coming of the *Übermensch*. Again it is possible to supplement our reading of "The Comedian of the Letter C" with a passage from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, specifically the fourth part of Zarathustra's Prologue when he sings praises of the coming *Übermensch* to an unappreciative audience of burghers:

I love all who are like heavy drops falling one by one out of the dark cloud  
that lowereth over man: they herald the coming of the lightning, and succumb as

heralds.

Lo, I am a herald of the lightning, and a heavy drop out of the cloud: the lightning,  
however, is the Superman.—

Later, Zarathustra will name the dark cloud as humanity itself, that is, a cloud out of which a steady “drenching of stale lives” falls down. Crispin, now a Zarathustrian lion and so well on his way to *Übermensch*—though by no means yet arrived—sees this drenching cease, replaced by bolts of lightning, heralding his imagination’s ultimately self-surpassing destination.

And so it is as something of a Zarathustrian lion that Crispin enters the Yucatan Proud of having stripped the world and himself of its ugly dogmatisms, he declares himself “too destitute to find / In any commonplace the sought-for aid.” Like one of Zarathustra’s leonine “sublime ones” who knows that “[u]nnattainable is beauty to all ardent wills” (*TSZ* II, xxxv), Crispin is

a man made vivid by the sea,  
A man come out of luminous traversing,  
Much trumpeted, made desperately clear,  
Fresh from discoveries of tidal skies,  
To whom oracular rockings gave no rest.  
Into a savage colour he went on.

Having ostensibly achieved the second stage in his ascension to the rank of *Übermensch*, Crispin roars on “in savage colour,” and his progress towards becoming “the meaning of the earth” is duly recorded by the narrator who gaily announces, “How greatly had he grown in his demesne, / This auditor of insects!” Apparently once a poet very much in the manner of those derided by Zarathustra (writing “his couplet yearly to the spring, / As dissertation of profound

delight” and so forth), Crispin, “stopping, on voyage, in a land of snakes” finds “his vicissitudes had much enlarged / his apprehension.” Again, while not necessarily confirming material conjunction between “The Comedian as the Letter C” and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Crispin’s sojourn on serpent island nonetheless corresponds remarkably to a moment in Zarathustra’s travels when he finds himself in the company of a group of sailors who have set sea from “the Happy Isles.” At first Zarathustra disdains contact, but soon rediscovers his affection for “all those who make distant voyages, and dislike to live without danger” (III, xlvi 1). Having warmed to his fellow Argonauts of the spirit, he then regales them with the story of the “enigma” of the shepherd whom he had encountered on the ground “writhing, choking, quivering, with distorted countenance, and with a heavy black serpent hanging out of his mouth” (ibid 2). He asks his listeners to interpret this awful tableau, but not surprisingly, they are unable to offer any exegesis. Neither does Zarathustra, at this point, unpack the parable.<sup>7</sup>

In what might be read as a comically lapidary gloss on these extraordinary events, the narrator recalls how Crispin, “Stopping, on voyage, in a land of snakes, / Found his vicissitudes had much enlarged / His apprehension.” Although the hissing of “vicissitudes” suggests all that our hero might have experienced, we never know whether he ever found his own head inside the mouth of a snake. We are told only that his brief sojourn among serpents “made him intricate / In moody rucks, and difficult and strange in all desires” or a “sonorous nutshel[l] rattling inwardly” (II, 23-24, 27). That is, Crispin’s mood parallels that of Zarathustra, who after his encounter with the enigma of shepherd and snake, continues onward “with such enigmas and

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<sup>7</sup> Later in Book III, in “The Convalescent” chapter, Zarathustra reveals that he himself had choked on the serpent of his great disgust at the smallness of man.

bitterness in his heart sail[ing] o'er the sea" (III, xlvii). (Crispin's reported temper may also parodically recall the sombre and ferociously nay-saying Zarathustrian lion.)

The seeming parallels continue as Crispin's sudden perception that "coolness for his heat came suddenly, / And only, in the fables that he scrawled / With his own quill, in its indigenous dew,"(ii, 31-33) recalls Zarathustra's epiphany following his encounter with the enigma of serpent and shepherd that whereas "companions did the creating one once seek, and children of *his* hope . . . . lo, it turned out that he could not find them, except he himself should first create them" (III, xlvii). In a manner that might be seen to echo Zarathustra's exhortations in the "Old and New Tables" chapter of Book III that a creator be hard as a diamond, Crispin holds out hopes for "an aesthetic tough, diverse," (ii, 34) composed of "beautiful barenesses as yet unseen" (ii, 40). While he finds much in the way of "beautiful barenesses" in the Caribbean amphitheatre, however, his response falls suddenly, and sharply, short of his former leonine disdain. Crispin is deeply, troublingly affected by this earth, "[s]o streaked with yellow, blue and green and red / In beak and bud and fruity gobbet-skins" (ii, 53-4). As Vendler notes, there is an element of squeamishness in Stevens' description of the verdant jungle, but it is Crispin's suddenly resolving affection under an explicitly maternal sun for "a new reality of parrot-squawks" (ii, 59) that should catch and hold our attention.

Crispin is above all a clown, and as Guerreschi notes, "deadpan attitudes and sudden reversals" must attend him (74). Yet the narrator does not let his hero's sudden attachment to squawking parrots pass unremarked, though his comments purport to do just that: "So much for that" (ii, 58), he says. "Let that trifle pass" (ii, 60), he opines. "Don't worry," the narrator seems to be saying, "despite his unanticipated attraction to the 'juicily opulent' earth and one of its



more raucous inhabitants, our freeman hero is still no less ‘a man made vivid by the sea’.” And indeed our now “affectionate emigrant”(ii, 58) seems for a moment to follow still in the gaily nay-saying footsteps of Zarathustra, as it were, when he sets himself to inspect “the facade / Of the cathedral” (ii, 62-3), making notes rather than taking communion. So, too, does Zarathustra in “The Priests” section of Book II, bring his judgement to bear on houses of faith: “Oh, just look at those tabernacles which those priests have built themselves! Churches they call their sweet-smelling caves!” (xxvi). But whereas Zarathustra vows that “only when the clear sky looketh again through ruined roofs, and down upon grass and red poppies on ruined walls—will I again turn my heart to the seats of this God” (ibid.), Crispin finds himself scampering to take shelter inside this New World house of faith.<sup>8</sup> That is, hearing and seeing an actual tropical thunderstorm “approaching like a gasconade of drums” (ii, 65), Crispin “t[akes] flight” (ii, 74). After all, as the narrator observes, “An annotator has his scruples, too” (ii, 75). And so, scrupling first to ensure the safety of his own skin, our “connoisseur of elemental fate” (ii, 77) finds himself kneeling, now a rather cowardly lion, “in the cathedral with the rest” (ii, 76). And yet, this “actual” (rather than metaphoric) thunderstorm does mark a true “sea-change” in Crispin. That he feels “the *Andean* breath” (ii, 88) on his neck confirms that he is, at last, becoming an inhabitant of the New World, rather than the Old. Thus as he feels the mountain air of the New World blowing fresh and cold, he becomes “studious of a self possessing him, / That was not in him in the crusty town / From which he sailed” (ii, 90-92).

Canto III, titled “Approaching Carolina,” marks a critical turn. Stevens begins to

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<sup>8</sup> Note Riddel’s wry observation that such an experience is “not unknown in the history of Romanticism” [!]

construct his hero Crispin as one who truly struggles to keep both his own existence and his creative acts loyal to the realities of earth.<sup>1</sup> What Crispin will discover to be of value at this point in his voyage will be the “rancid rosin” (iii, 78) of a working river in all its rude particulars. Crispin discovers the “arrant stinks”(iii, 81) of the everyday concourse of human affairs to be the meaning of the earth, and in this prosaic world the very ground of his poetic powers.

Appropriately, Canto III begins on a comic note of portentous anti-climax: “The book of moonlight is not written yet / Nor half begun, but, when it is, leave room / For Crispin, fagot in the lunar fire.” As Joseph Carroll and others have noted, Stevens’ early passion for Keats’ *Endymion* likely informs Crispin’s brief intoxication under moonlight.<sup>2</sup> No doubt Stevens is making gentle mock of the callow intensity of his own youthful attachment to what Boorstein calls a decadent romanticism. But neither Carroll, nor others like Simons or Daniel Fuchs, takes adequate account, it seems to me, of the parodic intensity of Crispin’s lunar hallucinations of his new found land:

America was always north to him,  
A northern west or western north, but north,  
And thereby polar, polar-purple, chilled  
And lank, rising and slumping from a sea

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<sup>1</sup> In suggesting that it is in the latter half of the poem that Crispin comes fully into his heroic own in his search for what “will suffice,” I disagree with Vendler who sees whatever heroism the poem offers being contained in its first cantos.

<sup>2</sup> In a journal entry from July 19, 1899, Stevens writes, “The moon was very fine. Coming over the field toward the bridge I turned to see it hanging in the dark east. I felt a thrill at the mystery of the thing and perhaps a little touch of fear. When home I began the third canto of “Endymion” which open with O Moon! and Cynthia! And that sort of thing. It was intoxicating” (L 29).

Of hardy foam, receding flatly, spread  
In endless ledges, glittering, submerged  
And cold in a boreal mistiness of the moon.  
The spring came there in clinking pannicles  
Of half-dissolving frost, the summer came,  
If ever, whisked and wet, not ripening,  
Before winter's vacancy returned.  
The myrtle, if the myrtle ever bloomed,  
Was like a glacial pink upon the air.  
The green palmettoes in crepuscular ice  
Clipped frigidly blue-black meridians  
Morose chiaroscuro, gauntly drawn. (iii, 12-27)

No less than Zarathustra under his sun, Crispin under the moon is a figure "all will" in his search for a new continent for his imagination:

How many poems he denied himself  
In his observant progress, lesser things  
Than the relentless contact he desired;  
How many sea-masks he ignored; what sounds  
He shut out from his tempering ear; what thoughts,  
Like jades affecting the sequestered bride;  
And what descants, he sent to banishment! (iii, 28-34)

Briefly obsessed with his vision of "morose chiaroscuro, gauntly drawn," Crispin as a latter-day

Odysseus closes his mind to all “descants” which might distract, “descants” which the next section confirms to be those of the sun.<sup>3</sup> At heart, however, he hearkens to a contrapuntal music and comes to embrace such variation. Thus we are told explicitly that Crispin eventually “conceived his voyaging to be / An up and down between two elements, / A fluctuating between sun and moon” (iii, 47-49).

It is in keeping with his faith in contrapuntal melodies and rhythms that Stevens in the final section of Canto III presents the “rancid rosin, burly smells. . .arrant stinks” of the river of humanity as part of the earth’s “essential prose,” and “as being, in a world so falsified, / The one integrity” (iii, 83, 84-84).<sup>4</sup> In “From the Journal of Crispin,” the first version of the poem, the reader is taken from the physical river deep into a river of humanity. From the working rankness of the river in what is perhaps now South Carolina, we find ourselves on

cobbled merchant streets,

The shops of chandlers, tailors, bakers, cooks,

The Coca-Cola bars, the barber-poles,

The Strand and Harold Lloyd, the lawyers’ row,

The Citizen’s Bank, two tea rooms, and a church. (iii, 97-101)

Crispin is “happy in this metropole,” and, moreover, meditates on it as source and substance of poetry. Of bakers, Crispin asks, “Are they one moment flour / Another pearl?”, and the reader watches as in our hero’s mind the “flimsiest tea room fluctuates / Through crystal changes,” and

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<sup>3</sup> For another reading of “descants” see Barbara Comin.

<sup>4</sup>Whereas Zarathustra repeatedly pronounces himself sullied by the quotidian and the heterogenous, in his Prologue describing man as “a polluted stream,” Crispin accepts all that he encounters as vital “[c]urriculum for the marvelous sophomore” (III 86).

“even Harold Lloyd / Proposes antic Harlequin.” As Simons puts it, here, in “the beauty of the commonplace,” he finds “the possibility of a realistic, an honest American poetry” (105).

That only through art can life be “justified” was one of Nietzsche’s chief tenets, and one to which Stevens largely subscribed. But as Stevens said, in his *Adagia*, while “poetry is a purging of the world’s poverty and change and evil and death,” it is only “a *present* perfecting, a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life” (*CPP* 906, italics mine). Stevens believed that part of a new faith in human creative will meant the *unceasing* labour of “transmutating” “plain shops” into poetry, “[b]y aid of starlight, distance, wind, war, death,” as he wrote in the early version of his *Comedian* poem.

Like the “present perfecting” of poetry, Crispin’s colony offers only a temporary solution. The very opening verse to “The Idea of a Colony,” the fourth canto of “The Comedian”—“Nota: his soil is man’s intelligence”—suggests the cyclical force of time for it is a most deliberate inversion of the opening verse of the poem itself. It is in the face of the relentlessness of time, but also upon the strength of his new found conviction that the earth is the meaning of man, that Crispin “la[ys] bare / His cloudy drift and plan[s] a colony.” Notably, however, this is not yet a colony of flesh and blood, but is rather a Plymouth Rock of the mind—and one of the striking things about Crispin’s “idea of a colony” is how it is set up to fail, and quickly abandoned. Such “singular collation[s]” as “The natives of the rain are rainy men,” and “The man in Georgia walking among pines / Should be pine-spokesman,” are no sooner proposed than they are dismissed as part of the “racking masquerade” separating our poet-colonist still from the true intelligence of his soil.

For Martha Strom, Crispin’s desire to know his native soil as an objective fact, without

“fictive flourishes,” marks him as a committed practitioner of “the local color” movement which was still very much in vogue in 1922, and thus, ultimately, as no hero for Stevens. As Strom reads it, “The Comedian as the Letter C” “records Stevens’ ambivalence as he faced a crossroads where he would choose his route through contemporary currents in American literature” (259). Chief among the paths he had determined *not* to choose was the “evangeliz[ing] for a metonymic representation of experience in art” (265) present in the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz and also in the poems of Williams Carlos Williams. Identifying George Santayana as one of the shaping spirits behind “The Comedian,” Strom argues that the philosopher’s “sanction of the power of the irreverence of comedy to dislodge myth might well have led Stevens to use his comic style as a weapon” (264) against the myth of a purely American locale.<sup>5</sup>

It seems likely that Stevens did read Santayana’s essays on comedy, and was influenced by them, perhaps most particularly, as Strom herself notes, by the philosopher’s conclusion to “The Comic Mask” that

the mind is not a slave nor a photograph: it has a right to enact a pose, to assume a panache, and to create what prodigious allegories it will for the mere sport and glory of it. . . . To embroider upon experience is not to bear false witness against one’s neighbour, but to bear true witness to oneself. . . . Why should we quarrel with human nature, with metaphor, with myth, with impersonation? The foolishness of the simple is delightful; only the foolishness of the wise is exasperating. (qtd. in Corrigan, 77)

For Strom, it is the exasperating “‘foolishness of the wise’ to which Crispin succumbs when he

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<sup>5</sup> For insight into the intersections of Santayana and Nietzsche in Stevens’ poetics, see Wesley North’s dissertation, 1998.

creates his localist prologomena” (268-69). She suggests that after the “crepuscular moment” of Canto III that finds Crispin fluctuating productively between his soil and his intelligence, the comedian “sinks more and more deeply into a quagmire of localism so extreme that it consumes all his emotions and leaves him nothing but the power to reproduce physically” (270).

But surely she misreads both Crispin’s and Stevens’ project here. Focusing on the revisions Stevens made to Canto III when he transformed “The Journal of Crispin” into “The Comedian,” in order that she might more fully demonstrate the poet’s ambivalence towards the localism of his peers, Strom neglects what might rather be read as Crispin’s own *dismissal* of the “local color” movement in Canto IV. Having briefly flirted with the poetic possibilities of having the “responsive man” in Florida “prick[ing] thereof, not on the psaltery, / But on the banjo’s categorical gut” (iv, 55-6) and of making melons “apposite ritual” (iv, 68), Crispin tosses this prolegomena into the trash as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the doctrine that “the soil is man’s intelligence.”

But as the early version of Canto IV in “From the Journal of Crispin” confirms, in fact, the matter of how we are to understand the earth’s command over man’s intelligence is, for Crispin, as much a philosophical question as it is an aesthetic one. That it is necessarily *more* a philosophical question than an aesthetic one is suggested by narrator’s description of Crispin’s projected colony as

A race of natives in a primitive land,  
But primitive because it is more true  
To its begetting than its patriarch,  
A race obedient to its origins

And from the obstinate scrutiny of its land,  
And in its land's own wit and mood and mask,  
Evolving the conjectural resonance  
Of voice, the flying youthfulness of form,  
Of a spirit to be singer of the song  
That Crispin formulates but cannot sing.

That is, Crispin's engagement with his soil can *only* be philosophical—and physical—rather than poetic. He cannot compose the poems of his climate because he is too newly arrived: he has not scrutinized the land sufficiently to evolve a “conjectural resonance of voice” out of the land's own “mood and mask.” T.S. Eliot would say that his sensibility is not yet unified: he cannot yet feel his thoughts or think his feelings.

As an early expression of Stevens' interest in how poetry helps us live our lives, “The Comedian as the Letter C” distinguishes itself in combining a prodigious vision of what might, *in future*, be possible with the most humble limits of its immediate conclusions. Although Crispin does not renege on his conviction that “the soil is man's intelligence,” he concludes that he himself is not ready to sing its song, the poem of the earth, and so it is that at the end of Canto IV—the final canto in the early version of “The Comedian”—Crispin,

Preferring text to gloss ... humbly served  
Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,  
A clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown.

In so choosing to serve a “grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,” Stevens' mock-hero embarks on a humbler path than that proposed by Zarathustra, who would assume absolute



command of *his* climate:

And how could I endure to be a man, if man were not also the composer, and  
riddle-reader, and redeemer of chance! . . . To redeem what is past, and to  
transform every “It was” into “Thus would I have it!”—that only do I call  
redemption! (II, xlii).

Crispin, by contrast, will be forever barking his shins against the shock of “it is” and “it was.” That is, he will bumble through life as a clown, buffeted and rebuffed – but nonetheless resilient. As we are told in Canto V, Crispin will “has[p] on the surviving form, / For him, of shall or ought to be in is” (v, 34-35). For Crispin there is no redemption. Yet there will be poetry.

In the weeks he took to revise “From the Journal of Crispin,” Stevens added a fulsome (and often florid) exploration of Crispin’s turn to domesticity in two cantos titled “A Nice Shady Home” and “Daughters with Curls,” respectively. Unprecedented in any likely American and British precursors, Cantos V and VI of “The Comedian” are nonetheless so excessive in parts that they can only be read as burlesquing someone or something. As Vendler observes, “except for the opening definitions of Crispin, there are no excesses of elaboration [elsewhere in the poem] to equal the density of the picture of Crispin’s cabin as he returns to social nature” (43).

Canto V opens upon Crispin “as hermit, pure and capable, / Dwel[ling] in the land.” The narrator tells us that “if discontent / Had kept him still the pricking realist,” Crispin “might have come / To colonize his polar planterdom / And jig his chits on cloudy knee.” Alas for the “living plantation of *his* thoughts,” however, the clown finds contentment:

Crispin dwelt in the land and dwelling there  
Slid from his continent by slow recess

To things within his actual eye, alert

To the difficulty of rebellious thought

When sky is blue. The blue infected will. (11-15)

With the exception of the yarrow which “seal[s] pensive purple under its concern”(17) as it observes Crispin’s distinctly unheroic ebbing from his quest for a “matinal continent” for his imagination,<sup>1</sup> seemingly all other things of the earth,

now this thing and now that

Confined him, while it cosseted, condoned,

Little by little, as if the suzerain soil

Abashed him by carouse to humble yet

Attach. (18-21)

The narrator’s convoluted syntax is most confining, almost swaddling, and therefore most appropriate to present Crispin’s child-like surrender to the security and comforts of his surroundings. Crispin knows himself to be the contented, but *dependent*, son of his maternal soil. Yet he is not troubled. What follows Crispin’s recognition of his place in the pattern of things is a long series of rhetorical questions about what might have seemed an appropriate response to such a falling off in ambition, beginning with, “Was he to bray this in profoundest brass / Arointing his dreams with fugal requiems?” (V, 36-37). In sum, Crispin decides, no theatrics is best: “For realists, what is is what should be.” And so Crispin’s cabin “shuffles up,” his duenna brings “her prisms blonde,” and the door closes upon a happy scene of domestic bliss. Crispin is

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<sup>1</sup> Yarrow, legendary as an aid in staunching bleeding, is also known as Soldier’s Woundwort. Its Latin name, *achillea millefolium*, apparently commemorates Achilles’s taking the herb into battle.

now the contented “magister of a single room.”

Those appalled by this “haphazard denouement” might well be inclined to concur with Zarathustra’s disgruntled comment on the woe incurred by a wedding: “This man seemed to me worthy and ripe for the meaning of the earth: but when I saw his wife the earth seemed to me a house for the nonsensical. . . . This man set forth like a hero in quest of truth and at last he captured a little dressed-up life. He calls it his marriage” (96).<sup>2</sup> Crispin, however, “in the presto of the morning,” finds “a fig in sight, / And cream for the fig and silver for the cream, / A blonde to tip the silver and to taste / The rapey gouts,” and he *beholds* the “good star” as that which gives meaning to the human. That is, the sun strengthens Crispin in his revels at table and marriage bed. The ribald note continues to the end of the canto, concluding in the assertion of equivalence between the abundant bestowing virtues of the sun, and those of the quotidian. The narrator insists that while some forms of the quotidian may, indeed, deplete philosophers and poets, the erotics of the day-to-day, such as Crispin experiences, “sa[p] like the sun, true fortuner. / For all it takes it gives a humped return / Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed.”<sup>3</sup>

The final canto of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” titled “And Daughters with Curls,” opens with the narrator in full mock-heroic song as he provides a “thrumming” introduction for Crispin’s “last deduction.” The narrator of Crispin’s story heralds this “deduction” as “Bubbling felicity in cantilene, / Prolific and tormenting tenderness / Of music, as it comes to unison.” What comes on the heels of this rhapsody has much felicity and tenderness, and is certainly prolific,

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Bloom who uses the term “rancid” to describe the “rumpling bottomnesses” of Crispin’s marriage bed.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss some of the possible meanings of this puzzling line below, 267-68.

but could only ironically be described as “a grand pronunciamiento”—though Crispin *is* evidently in revolt against someone or something. We are told how Crispin’s “bluet-eyed” and curly-haired chits came to be jigged upon his knee, “Leaving no room,” on this “prophetic joint, for its diviner young.” Certainly, Crispin’s offspring are by no means divine. For some readers such as Vendler, they are altogether too earthly, exuding a “resinous rankness” (49).<sup>4</sup> Others, reading less viscerally, have found Crispin’s daughters easier to accept. Frank Kermode, for example, was happy to read them as “without doubt the seasons, cardinal to the life of Nature and [their father’s] own life” (48). Margaret Peterson, finding Kermode’s judgement “untenable,” interprets the daughters as “represent[ing] the commingling elements of the poet’s creative process” (131).

I myself find most persuasive James Baird’s assessment of Crispin’s daughters as representing

the centuries of his history on American shores: the first, in a “capuchin” cloak and hood (the mien of a Puritan wife); the second, in a half-awakened state (a tentative national consciousness, as the eighteenth century advances); the third, a “creeper under jaunty leaves” (“leaves” of an emerging American poetry of the nineteenth century”); the fourth, still “pent,” the one not yet fully grown (the inception of the twentieth). (202)

To Baird’s succinct assessment, I would add that Crispin’s landfall in *Carolina*, rather than either the state South or North, establishes the date of his voyage as sometime between 1663 and 1729 as it was between those dates that the Province of Carolina proper existed. I would add further that just as the description of the third daughter as “jaunty under leaves” seems to refer, as Baird

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<sup>4</sup> Bloom names the daughters “manifest poetic blots,” and even goes so far as to wonder “if Stevens is attempting to write badly” (82).

implies, to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, thus definitively marking her as a figure for nineteenth-century poetic undertakings, so does her later incarnation as one "gaping at the orioles. . . [and] peaked for rhapsody." That is, this "queerly inane lady poet"(43), as Vendler names her, is surely Emily Dickinson of the angelic widow's peak and author of "To Hear an Oriole Sing."

One wonders whom Stevens might have had in mind when he sketched his infant modernist as "Mere blusteriness that gewgaws jollified, / All din and gobble, blasphemously pink." Pitts Sanborn did bring back a copy of *Ulysses* for Stevens sometime in October 1922 and it is tempting to think that some early impression of Joyce's bumptiously fleshy novel informs the poet's shorthand here. Assessing the contemporary state of modern poetry, of which he is a part, less confrontationally, Stevens finds it to have matured enough to be a "digit curious"—that is, both asking and provoking questions.

Crispin's "colony" of poets, of poetry, which was only *in potentia* in "From the Journal of Crispin," thus comes to pass in a form most physical,

involv[ing] him in midwifery so dense

His cabin counted as phylactery,

Then place of vexing palankeens, then haunt

Of children nibbling at the sugared void,

Infants yet eminently old, then dome

And halidom for the unbraided femes,

Green crammers of the green fruits of the world,

Bidders and bidders for its ecstasies,

True daughters of both Crispin and his clay. (VI, 15-23)

As “green crammers of the green fruits of the world,” these children appear creatures of most visceral appetite and seem rather less than ideal handmaidens to their father’s dreams of poetry—at least at first. Thus we are told how the “Effective colonizer [was] sharply stopped / In the door-yard by his own capacious bloom” (ibid, 25-26).

No doubt, as Bloom suggests, there *is* a shade of Whitman in Crispin’s excessively verdant door-yard. But where the author of *Poems of Our Climate* finds a bitterness in this allusion which “tell[s] us how far short of Whitman poor Crispin had ended” (82), I read it only as a passing nod of recognition to one of the patriarchs of American poetry. I say here that the narrator “nods” to Whitman because the ensuing “tender” music of this final canto of “The Comedian” reveals that Crispin has not, in fact, been “stopped” by the blooming of his daughters. Rather, his poetic aspirations will bloom in them. In them he finds a new continent in which his imagination might dwell, if only posthumously. He, like Whitman, is one of the patriarchs of American poetry. He will not live to write America as a poem, but as we have seen, his daughters will—albeit on their own terms. And so the narrator concludes his portrait of Crispin’s progeny as

Four daughters in a world too intricate  
In the beginning, four blithe instruments  
Of differing struts, four voices several  
In couch, four more personae, intimate  
As buffo, yet divers, four mirrors blue  
That should be silver, four accustomed seeds  
Hinting incredible hues, four self-same lights

That spread chromatics in hilarious dark,

Four questioners and four sure answerers. (ibid, 55-63)

Vendler, no less than Bloom, finds this “denouement” a bitter failure. Determined in her conviction that Stevens himself felt an “active repugnance in the presence of the sensual and social daughters” (45) of Crispin, she quotes only the final line of this passage when she argues for Crispin’s “embittered” state when his “attempt to transform reality fails ... when he is faced with the same insoluble lump only disastrously multiplied” (50). She writes, “Stevens certainly cannot write lovingly about a collection of raw turnips, though he conveys their appalling rawness by din and gobble; nor can he truly transform them, though he tries to cast the mantle of the transformed over what he feels as the deformed by calling the multiplied turnips “four questioners and four sure answerers”” (50).

But Vendler is simply (and surprisingly) wrong here. Crispin and his daughters are of course part of the turnip world, but this rooted constitution is, at worst, cause for a certain fatalism, but never recoil. And she is wrong, moreover, to suggest that Crispin’s children represent nothing more than “a simple perpetuation of self” (49). That their identities do expand beyond their father’s is made clear by the narrator’s description of them as “four mirrors blue / That should be silver.” That is, the daughters are pools of their own inscrutable selves, not mirrors for the father’s reflection. Rather than re-becoming a child, coming full circle, Crispin becomes a father to his “chits.”<sup>5</sup> Here Riddel’s insight into the several meanings of “chits” is most telling. As Riddel points out, “one of the root meanings of ‘chit’. . . is sprout or shoot;

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<sup>5</sup> Such a “re-becoming” into childhood would in fact achieve the third and final stage of Zarathustra’s metamorphosis of the human into the *Übermensch*.

another . . . a voucher for debts incurred”(101). Crispin’s “chits” are a sign to Crispin that a debt must, and will, be paid. But he is not unhappy. Crispin is a realist, and “for realists, what is is what should be.”

We are thus left with a picture of Crispin reasonably content with having passed on his comic motley to his four daughters who, “hinting incredible hues . . . [will] spread chromatics in hilarious dark.” These lovely lines celebrate the colour and comedy that Crispin’s “colony” of poet daughters will produce in and for America. As ones who “hinting incredible hues. . .[will] spread chromatics in hilarious dark,” they will compose the “gay-coloured canopy” of night. But like their father before them, these “four blithe instruments / Of differing struts” will be no “redeemers of chance,” transforming every “It was” into “Thus would I have it!” Like their parent, Crispin’s daughters will acknowledge the plum as prior to its poems, “Hasp[ing] on the surviving form, / For [them] of shall or ought to be in is.”

### The Sense of an Ending

The deliberately lackadaisical conclusion of “The Comedian as the Letter C” suggests that what the *comedy* of life gives in fact is uncertainty and inconsequence, even irrelevance. So, the narrator tells us, we may, if we choose, “score this anecdote” as something that Crispin “willed,” as “Seraphic proclamations of the pure / Delivered with a deluging onwardness.” On the other hand, however, we may simply find that “the music sticks,” that the “anecdote is false,” and that Crispin is “a profitless philosopher, beginning with green brag, / Concluding fadedly.” In any case, the narrator says, chiding gently, “what can all this matter since / The relation comes,



benignly, to its end?”

In his early reading of “The Comedian,” John J. Enck asserts that the poem “*becomes* anti-mythological because it fully depicts a disinherited twentieth-century comedian only to deny that this congenial imago exerts abiding power” (397, italics added). I would submit that the mythology under assault from the outset in Stevens’ poem is the very notion of “abiding power.” Crispin’s considerable imaginative strengths begin, in fact, with his acknowledgment of limits.<sup>6</sup> He seeks only what will suffice. He himself is only—and at times just barely—sufficient. Indeed, he is, as his very cipher suggests, *incomplete*. He is not a hierophantic Omega O, but a demotic clipped “c,” whose very voyage from Bordeaux to Yucatan to Carolina “traces,” as David LaGuardia observes, “an allegorical motif that approximates, but does not complete, a circle” (51).

That our comedian of the letter c will, and with amiable *willingness*, fail to inscribe a “perfectly revolved” journey, or narrative, or self, is presaged in “Anecdote of the Abnormal,” which was written a year or so before “From the Journal of Crispin.” Here is the “odd little ditty” which I believe to foretell something of Crispin’s future identity as being of the letter c:

He called the hydrangeas purple. And they were.

Not fixed and deadly, (like a curving line

That merely makes a ring.)

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<sup>6</sup> For eloquent and insightful comment on the question of limits in Stevens, see Bart Eeckhout’s *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*. (2002) As Eeckhout notes, desire is a function of limits, and thus, for Stevens, “to be alive . . . was to desire, and to keep one’s desire burning was to stay alive. This was his deep-rooted conviction, and it could never have been the conviction of a melioristic utilitarian or of a sociopolitically committed activist—but only of a man whose frustrations and alienations ran so deep as to require a basic vitalizing prop otherwise void of purpose of content” (141).

It was a purple changeable to see.

And so hydrangeas came to be.

The common grass is green.

But there are regions where the grass

Assumes a pale, Italianate sheen—

Is almost Byzantine.

And there the common grass is never seen.

And in those regions one still feels the rose

And feels the grass

Because new things make old things again. . .

And so with men.

Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint!

The exhausted realist beholds

His tattered manikin arise,

Tuck in the straw,

And stalk the skies.

Samuel French Morse, who in fact reads Crispin's adventures as "bring[ing] him full circle," finds "no correlation between 'Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint' and the 'exhausted realist' who evokes them" (17). As I read these poems, however, such a correlation may indeed be discerned

if we understand the realist to be exhausted because of what has been his un-ending duty *as* a realist—in a world without imagination—to objectively name anew each day the flowers and the grass and all things of earth in all of their eternally “changeable to see” particularity. Adam-like (but the son of no God), this realist *must* name each thing that it may *be*— “He called the hydrangeas purple. And they were”—but he cannot name them once and for all because that would deny their ever-changingness, would make them “fixed and deadly, (like a curving line / That merely makes a ring.)”

With thus good reason to feel tired, the realist hallucinates his “tattered manikin,” who, having both reality and the imagination in his bloodline, that is, as valet and as saint, might be better suited to take up the burden of all this naming, this perpetually making new. That is, this “manikin” might be a poet, the one to compose the poem of the earth, but a poem which must not inscribe “a curving line / That merely makes a ring.” Rather it must be a poem of purples “changeable to see,” of poems and purples which mark the changes and breaks in the things of earth as expressing not “O” but “c.” And so we glimpse here part of Crispin’s name and destiny.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, when Crispin makes his second appearance, in “From the Journal of Crispin,” this promise appears much reduced. We are told in its fourth and final canto, and in a line preserved in “The Comedian,” to “let the rabbit run, the cock declaim,” as if to say, “Let the earth be and name its own meaning!” And then the poem deliberately limits the scope of Crispin’s making and being:

As Crispin in his attic shapes the book

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<sup>7</sup> One might recall here the inscription that precedes “Notes Toward the Supreme Fiction”: “In the uncertain light of single, certain truth, / Equal in living changingness to the light/ In which I meet you.”

That will contain him, he requires this end:

The book shall discourse of himself alone,

Of what he was, and why, and of his place,

And of its fitful pomp and parentage.

Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres.

Where the “exhausted realist” in “Anecdote of the Abnormal” appeared to hope that his “manikin” might “stalk the skies,” the narratorial voice of Crispin’s “Journal” insists that his “introspective voyageur” may speak only to the “fitful pomp and parentage” of his own life. “Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres”—but that will be the subject of a different book. At first glance, the final cryptic line of “The Comedian as the Letter C” might seem to be the final nail in the coffin of poetic aspirations on the part of Crispin, “tattered manikin”: “So may the relation of each man be clipped.” Set deliberately apart from the poem that precedes it, one might take the narrator’s final comment on Crispin to be Stevens’ judgment.

I read it otherwise. Recalling the prohibition expressed in “Anecdote of the Abnormal” against the “fixed and deadly. . . curving line that only makes a ring,” alongside the twice made projections of Crispin perhaps one day *stalking* like some giant across the skies or “in other spheres,” I propose that it is, in fact, *in the name of poetry* that Crispin does not, ultimately, “stalk” anywhere, but is rather “clipped” at the last and sent “benignly” to his grave. This destiny was latent in Crispin’s name and being from his inception, but I believe that only in the final stages of “The Comedian” did Stevens find “severance clear.”

What “The Comedian as the Letter C” insists is that the “meaning of the earth” is, for us, a muddy motley with a hard rock at the bottom. As he would write in “Credences of Summer,”

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.  
It rises from land and sea and covers them.  
It is a mountain half way green and then,  
The other immeasurable half, such rock  
As placid air becomes. But it is not

A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.  
It is the visible rock, the audible,  
The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,  
On this present ground, the vividest repose,  
Things certain sustaining us in certainty. (VI, 1-10)

For Stevens, there lay difficult solace in the certainty that the rock is no “symbol in hermitage” and that one day, for each person viewing the rock, “there [will be] nothing left of time,” because out of this certain hard coldness comes the bright warmth of poetry. Thus Stevens drew his comedian of the commons, Crispin, as part of the “credences of summer,” at play under the *brief* summer sun,

[a] fat . . . roseate characte[r],  
Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,  
Completed in a completed scene, speaking  
[His] parts as in a youthful happiness. (X, 13-15)

### The Sound of the Letter C

As James Baird observes, “the total act of the comedian is a strictly traced diminution from bravura,” notwithstanding the evident linguistic “bravura” of “The Comedian” itself. Crispin and his early aspirations to *be* “the intelligence of his soil,” to “*be* the meaning of the earth” are presented in a decidedly comic light: only when the aspiring clown becomes the humble “magister of a single room” does he, for the most part, cease to be mocked. As Fuchs observes, “In showing man in his poverty and his natural surroundings, Stevens wishes to arouse him to a sense of modest possibility which will not be trammelled by the false claims of outmoded systems” (183). Stevens’ respect for Crispin’s choices at the end of the poem – his determination to accommodate common things as his reality – is strongly suggested by a letter Stevens wrote late in life to Italian literary critic Renato Poggioli who would less than a year later see published his Italian translation of a number of Stevens’ poems. Here, commenting on the considerable inherent difficulties of translating “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens writes,

There is another point about the poem to which I should like to call attention and that is that it is what may be called an anti-mythological poem. The central figure is an every-day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do. This point makes it necessary for a translator to try to reproduce the every-day plainness of the central figure and the plush, so to speak, of his stage. (*L* 778, June 3, 1953).

As he did in “Lettres d’un Soldat,” Stevens seems determined here to extend the possibility of poetry to everyone, and in this he was no follower of Zarathustra. “Every-day plainness” and “modest possibility” are not goals for Nietzsche’s philosopher-poet persona—the very terms

reeking of the mediocrity of the last man whom he derides for his bovine acceptance that man's ultimate goal should be happiness. In her early reading of "The Comedian," Francis Murphy makes a passing but arresting comment about the absence of evil in Crispin's reality. As "Domination of Black" and "Anecdote of the Prince of the Peacocks" (1923) confirm, Stevens was writing poems contemporaneous with Crispin's voyage which dealt directly with this aspect of reality. Useful in understanding the skewed emphasis on the good of happiness in "The Comedian" is Riddel's insight that while it is most certainly "a poem about poetry in the largest sense ... that its main concern is with the poetry of living more clearly accounts for its comic design" (94).

As is well-known to readers who have sought to understand his quixotic poem, Stevens was uncharacteristically forthcoming about one particular aspect of "The Comedian," namely that part of his intention in writing had been "in a minor way, [to] orchestrat[e]" the sounds of the letter C." The comment just past occurs at the end of a letter from Stevens to Hi Simons which finds the poet replying at length to the critic's querying the meaning of "the letter C." Earlier in his reply, Stevens elaborates,

You know the old story about St. Francis wearing the bells around his ankles so that, as he went about his business, the crickets and so on would get out of his way and not be tramped on. Now, as Crispin moves through the poem, the sounds of the letter C accompany him, as the sounds of the crickets, etc. must have accompanied St. Francis. I don't mean to say that there is an incessant din, but you ought not to be able to read very far in the poem without recognizing what I mean. The sounds of the letter C included all related or derivative sounds. For instance, X, TS, and Z. (January 12, 1940. *L* 351)

An earlier comment to Ronald Lane Latimer gives further insight: “while the sound of that letter has more or less variety, and includes, for instance K and S, all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian” (November 15, 1935 *L* 294.)

Stevens’ sense of comedy here extends beyond the simply humorous to tap the genre’s association through its root, *komodia*, to revels of the commons. This fact is suggested by the poet’s response, in the summer of 1953, to Poggioli’s question about the identity of “man number one” in the third canto of “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” In the margins of a letter from Poggioli, Stevens wrote, “Man without variation. Man in C Major. The complete realization of the idea of man. Man at his happiest normal.”<sup>8</sup>

Stevens’ linking of the key of C with “man at his happiest normal” is not surprising, given that his musical literacy was high. He would have known C Major not only as one of the most commonly used key signatures but also as traditionally the key of “happy” music, whether Charpentier’s *Te Deum* or the early twentieth-century American folksong, “Short’nin’ Bread.” In choosing to ring the changes on the key of C over the course of Crispin’s search for a new continent within which his imagination might dwell, Stevens appears, then, to have wanted to set the joys of the “normal” to music.<sup>9</sup> As he remarked further on “The Comedian” in the aforementioned letter to Latimer, “The long and short of it is simply that I deliberately took the sort of life that millions of people live, without embellishing it except by the embellishments in

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<sup>8</sup> The letter from Poggioli, dated July 4, 1953, is to be found in the translator’s notes to his *Mattino Domenicale ed altre Poesie*, 174, qtd. in Baird 203).

<sup>9</sup> Here then I dissent from Louis Martz’s contention that Stevens’ use of sound in “The Comedian” is neither symbolic nor allegorical but is “rather an organizing, unifying factor that helps, by sonic emphasis and coalition to create the character of Crispin” (19).



which I was interested at the moment: words and sounds” (L 294). That Stevens was, however, more deeply invested in his “embellishments” of the life of his Everyman than his comment to Latimer suggests is affirmed in a postscript to the aforementioned letter to Simons in which he recalls that around the time of writing “The Comedian” he had “[begun] to feel that [he] . . . wanted to share the common life” (L 352). Evincing the persistence of this desire, Stevens concludes: “Of course I don’t agree with the people who say I live in a world of my own; I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center. For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the wood, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo convinces me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve” (L 352).<sup>10</sup> A valorization of the “happiest normal,” then, seems to have been central to the major C “music” of Crispin’s “introspective voyage”: Stevens’ rhapsodic variations in the letter C, which are also variations on the key of C, a key of “man at his happiest normal,” are written, as it were, on that instrument most suggestive of the quotidian “common life,” the harmonium.

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<sup>10</sup> In her recent commentary on the mature Stevens’ “love of the commonplace,” Liesl Olson judges the quotation above to show “the older Stevens. . . reread[ing] the verbal extravagance of his younger work, recasting “The Comedian as the Letter c” in a light more conducive to his new emphasis on the ‘normal’” (107). While Olsen’s contention that the quotidian becomes “an intensely *theorized* aspect of Stevens’ late work” is illuminating and valuable, her dismissal of the importance of a less theorized commons in “The Comedian” bears reexamination (*italics added*, 106).

Conclusion: Brave Men and Bare Earth.

The heaviness we lighten by light will,  
By the hand of desire, faint, sensitive, the soft  
Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand.

(“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” xv, 18-20)

Composed by a man who urged us “to be the poets of our lives, and first of all in the smallest and most commonplace matters” (*GS* 299), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is clearly concerned with “the poetry of living.” That the quest for a “new happiness,” as Nietzsche named it in his preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, is the great subject of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is also apparent. Shown from the outset to reject the “smug ease” (*GS* 318) of modern man, Zarathustra wants for us “*to live in danger!*” (*GS* 283, italics in original), convinced as he is that peril and happiness go hand in hand. As F. D. Luke shows us in his examination of the imagery of height in Nietzsche, this is the significance of the figure of the *Seiltänzer* (tight-rope walker) at the beginning of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. To dance out across the tight-rope is “to defy the macabre tragedy of life, to laugh at the Abyss, to achieve levity and overcome Gravity . . . to be raised up like an eagle, to hover effortlessly, to dance lightly through the sky like a god” (118-19).<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche’s many comments on “the poets” suggest that he conceived their ideal representative to be one who, like the *Seiltänzer*, would dance out over the abyss, “achiev[ing]

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<sup>1</sup> For insight into the impact of Nietzsche’s *Seiltänzer* on Expressionist painting and poetry, see Janice McCullagh.

levity” (in both senses) and overcoming the “gravity” (weight, sorrow) of earthly life.<sup>2</sup>

Wallace Stevens’ numerous figures of the poet or artist have little of the tight-rope walker in them, although some do seem participants in a rather down-at-heel circus act, like the “old fantoche” who “hang[s] his shawl upon the wind” in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (xxx, 2-3), or the figure who earlier in the same poem is cast as a performing seal: “He held the world upon his nose / And this-a-way he gave a fling” (xxv, 1-2). At the end of the second book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche observes that “because we are heavy and serious men in our ultimate depth, and are rather weights than men, there is nothing that does us so much good as the *fool’s cap and bells*” (#107, italics in original). No less than Nietzsche, the weighty Wallace Stevens did intermittently wear the fool’s cap. But whereas Nietzsche’s fool is a figure of ludic power who in embodying “all arrogant, soaring, dancing, mocking, childish and blessed Art” allows us not to get bogged down in our own weightiness and thereby “lose the *free dominion over things* which our ideal demands of us” (ibid, italics in original), Stevens’ fools often serve to remind us of our fragility and limits: of our essential *helplessness* in the face of forces larger than ourselves. Where Nietzsche’s fool is always projected as the moving spirit of the revels, like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Stevens’ often seem closer kin to that quintessential modern butt of the cosmic joke, the waif-like Charlie Chaplin.

My strong desire over the course of this dissertation has been to read Stevens *contra* Nietzsche. Recognizing the practical, theoretical, and rhetorical problems that would attend

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<sup>2</sup> See further in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche’s preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition delights in the selection of “songs” appended “in which a poet makes merry over all poets in a way not easily pardoned,” and the very first aphorism in the book disparages “the poets” for having “always been the valets of some morality or other.” See also *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, especially the chapter titled “Poets” in Book II.

claiming direct contact, I have stuck largely to trying to complicate our understanding of Stevens as a Nietzschean. In concluding, however, I turn to three poems from *Ideas of Order*, “How to Live. What to Do” (1935), “Delightful Evening” (1934), and “Evening Without Angels” (1934), arguing that these poems show trace of Stevens *actually* reading of Nietzsche—reading him, that is, both affirmatively, *and* resistantly.

In a letter written to Ronald Lane Latimer, on November 15, 1935, Stevens described “How to Live. What to Do” as his favourite poem in *Ideas of Order* “because it so definitely represents my way of thinking” (L 293). Here is the poem in full:

Last evening the moon rose above this rock  
Impure upon a world unpurged.  
The man and his companion stopped  
To rest before the heroic height.

Coldly the wind fell upon them  
In many majesties of sound:  
They that had left the flame-freaked sun  
To seek a sun of fuller fire.

Instead there was this tufted rock  
Massively rising high and bare  
Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown  
Like giant arms among the clouds.

There was neither voice nor crested image,  
No chorister, nor priest. There was  
Only the great height of the rock

And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and sound  
It made, away from the muck of the land  
That they had left, heroic sound  
Joyous and jubilant and sure.

Recalling my earlier discussions of correspondence in imagery between Stevens' poems and Nietzsche's philosophical writings, I trace a further hearkening to the philosopher's thought in "How to Live. What to Do": in its moon that rises "impure upon a world unpurged" (2); in the two men's search for "a sun of fuller fire"(8); and in their finding rapture "away from the muck of the land" (18), in the sound of the wind that is "joyous, jubilant and sure" (20). I also see striking parallels between this favourite poem of Stevens and Nietzsche's description of the moment of his discovery of his idea of Eternal Recurrence, recorded in *Ecce Homo* and reproduced by his sister Elisabeth in her introduction to the Oscar Levy edition of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

As this famous passage reveals, Nietzsche experienced this moment of discovery at decidedly "heroic height" (ibid, 4):

The fundamental idea of my work—namely, the Eternal Recurrence of all things—this highest of all possible formulae of a Yea-saying philosophy, first occurred to me in August 1881. I made a note of the thought on a sheet of paper, with the postscript: 6,000 feet beyond men and time! That day I happened to be wandering through the woods alongside the lake of Silvaplana, and I halted beside a huge, pyramidal and towering rock not far from Surlei. It was then that the

thought struck me. Looking back now, I find that exactly two months previous to this inspiration, I had had an omen of its coming in the form of a sudden and decisive alteration in my tastes—more particularly in music. It would even be possible to consider all “Zarathustra” as a musical composition. At all events, a very necessary condition in its production was a renaissance in myself in the art of hearing. In a small mountain resort (Recoaro) near Vicenza, where I spent the spring of 1881, I and my friend and Maestro, Peter Gast—also one who had been born again—discovered that the phoenix music that hovered over us, wore lighter and brighter plumes than it had done theretofore.

While the correspondences are not absolute between Nietzsche’s recollection here and “How to Live. What to Do,” they *are* compelling: in “the man and his companion” being re-born in Stevens’ poem in the shadow of a massive rock and into the “many majesties of sound” of a cold wind we might read a conflation of Nietzsche’s own epiphanies, first in Vicenza where he experienced with his beloved friend, Peter Gast, “a renaissance . . . in the art of hearing,” and second, in that ecstatic moment before the “huge, pyramidal and towering rock not far from Surlei.” If we allow the possibility of such a conflation, we may glimpse, in fact, Stevens’ direct investment in Nietzsche’s program for “the poetry of living.”

That “How to Live. What to Do” may not simply recapitulate Nietzsche’s moments of glory, however—assuming that it does so at all—is suggested by the fact that the discovery by its “man and his companion” of a “tufted rock” is explicitly described as being achieved “*instead* [of]” the sought-after “sun of fuller fire.” Further defined as being invested with “neither voice nor crested image,” this rock arguably *refuses* the kind of inspiration that Nietzsche had sensed

two months before his ramble above Surlei. Rather than ultimately perceiving something like “the phoenix music,” Stevens’ alpine walkers find only “the great height of rock” and the sound of the wind.

Stevens’ determination to strike an independent line from this heroic guide to life as poetry at high elevation, might be further discerned in “Delightful Evening,” composed a year after “How to Live. What to Do” and positioned as the final poem in *Ideas of Order*. Here is the poem in full:

A very felicitious eve,  
Herr Doktor, and that’s enough,  
Though the brow in your palm may grieve

At the vernacular of light  
(Omitting reefs of cloud):  
Empurpled garden grass;

The spruces’ outstretched hands;  
The twilight overfull  
Of wormy metaphors

Although over the course of his study of Nietzschean intertexts in the early Stevens, B. J. Leggett is scrupulous to avoid the rhetoric of “canny critics,” even he is drawn to speculate that “Delightful Evening” “may actually be addressed to Nietzsche” (231). As Leggett reminds us, when Hi Simon asked Stevens to whom “Herr Doktor” might refer, the poet replied in typically

cryptic idiom, “Any philosopher, particularly one of the German type” (*L* 347). That Stevens’ image of “any philosopher . . . of the German type” might well be Nietzsche himself gains credence in light of the fact, as Leggett notes further, that one of the best known and widely-circulated photographs of Nietzsche “depicts the philosopher staring sternly and somewhat disconsolately to one side, his prominent brow resting in his right hand” (231).

Recalling Nietzsche’s discussion of the “arbitrary” nature of metaphors in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” Leggett suggests the reference to “wormy metaphors” in “Delightful Evening” as a Nietzschean figure that describes “at least in part metaphors that worm their way out of fixed designations, metaphors that are difficult to hold on to or that appear arbitrary, that are not inevitable” (231). Leggett’s reading here is valuable, particularly as it does not simply assume that “wormy metaphors” could only be a negative figure. But he may stretch his point too far when he claims that the “wormy metaphors” of “Delightful Evening” and the “ecstatic air” of “Botanist on Alp (No. 1)” (1934) exhibit an equivalent investment in a happy world of becoming. This “Herr Doktor” is, after all, said to “grieve” at “the twilight *overfull* / Of wormy metaphors” (8-9), “overfull” surely suggesting unfortunate *excess*, rather than welcome abundance.

Furthermore, reading “Delightful Evening” as simply recapitulating Nietzsche’s thought suggests a certain blindness—or, rather, deafness—to the mildly teasing tone with which it addresses its philosopher subject: “A very felicitous eve, / Herr Doktor, and that’s enough” (1-2). The writings of Nietzsche suggest again and again that mere “felicity” is *never* “enough.” Finally, in its presentation of this “Herr Doktor” as one who “grieve[s] // At the vernacular of light / (Omitting reefs of cloud),” could “How to Live. What to Do” be recalling—and remonstrating with—first Zarathustra’s (and Nietzsche’s) distaste for the vernacular commons, and second, their passionate



attachment to a clear sky as a space of transcendent nobility?

While Stevens' poetic (and philosophical) exploration of the "meaning of the earth" and the will of men" were undeniably Nietzschean in some respects, his sense of the brave joy that should attend our recognition that "we live in . . . [an] island solitude, unsponsored, free" is patently *Stevensian* in its essential humility. Though Stevens in the late poem "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"(1951) *will* name the imagination as "that highest candle light[ing] the dark"(15), it is *just* a candle, solitary and ephemeral and destined to be blown out. Something of the essential vulnerability of the human spirit registers in the final lines of "Evening Without Angels," also from *Ideas of Order*:

Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,  
Except for our own houses, huddled low  
Beneath the arches and their spangled air,  
Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,  
Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,  
Where the voice that is great within us rises up,  
As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

("Evening Without Angels" 32-38).

Of course, in Stevens' litany, "Bare earth is best. Bare, bare," we might hear Nietzsche's own determination to strip the altars of illusion, tradition, and custom, might hear Zarathustra's exhortation that a humanity intent upon a "new happiness" must be hard as a diamond.<sup>3</sup> But whereas Nietzsche repeatedly projects his vision of heroic humanity above or beyond "the muck

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<sup>3</sup> See *TSZ*, III, lvi, 29.

of the land,” overcoming gravity and dancing “on all edges, / wave-crests, cliffs and mountain ledges,” to recall the words of Nietzsche’s “Dancing Song to the Mistral Wind,” Stevens identifies “the voice that is in us [that] makes a true response” as coming from “our own houses, *huddled low / Beneath the arches and their spangled air, / Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire*” (italics added). Moreover, while it is true that elsewhere, and repeatedly, in Stevens, that Nietzschean “brave man,” the sun, extends the promise of a greater than human splendour, here it is the “rounded moon” that draws forth “the voice that is great within us.” Admittedly, an earlier line in the poem, the emphatic declaration, “Let this be clear that we are men of sun” (16) has a more triumphant tone. While conceding that here again we may find the “Nietzschean” Stevens giving voice, I would counter that these “men of the sun” seem rather more forlorn than Nietzsche would have liked: it is, after all, as “sad men” that they “made angels” of a warm star.

The epigraph which accompanies “Evening Without Angels,” from the contemporary Italian philosopher, Mario Rossi, reads: “*the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking.*” There could well be something of the Nietzschean readable in Stevens’ choice of these lines: certainly both air and light were essential to Nietzsche’s own bright spirit. Given the physical suffering that Nietzsche himself endured intermittently, and increasingly, throughout his life, the “joy of having a body” must have frequently eluded him. But then again, he did know that joy of “walk[ing] in the Alps in the caresses of reality,” to recall the epigraph to my first chapter. But what, finally, of the “voluptuousness of looking”? As the original exponent of perspectivism, as such a significant philosopher of vision, as Gary Shapiro as shown, Nietzsche might equally be understood as the proponent of “voluptuous looking”—at least in the abstract. But in “Evening without Angels”

the final scene of “voluptuous looking” constitutes a most un-Nietzschean tableau. In my fourth chapter I referred briefly to the moment in Book II of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, when Zarathustra derides the moon for its “immaculate”—that is, sterile—“perception,” for pretending to a pregnancy that is false and a desire that is wholly retentive.<sup>4</sup> In “Evening Without Angels” we find the same planetary body in apparently fertile correspondence with the brave bare men of earth, who in fact discover that “the voice that is great within [them] rises up” as they “stand gazing at the rounded moon.”

Where Nietzsche projects the poet as a super-human hero who would *Seiltzner*-like dance out over the abyss, Stevens’ recurring focus is rather on the possibility of a poetics *sufficient* to help ordinary men and women, people of the commons, “live [their] lives” (*CPP*, 665). As he put it in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” we live by “instinct” in a perpetual dance between our brave projection of the earth as “gay tournamonde” and our even braver knowledge of it as “bare rock.” This dance *is* Nietzschean, at times, but it is more often, simply, Stevensian. We can only “lighten” the heaviness of an earth-bound life, not overcome it, and only by “light will,” at that. As Stevens knew so well, our human attachment to such things as “the soft / Touch and trouble of the touch of the actual hand” is an essential vulnerability that is the very soul of poetry.

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<sup>4</sup> See pg. 183-85.

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