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# Editor's Column: A Ghostly Visit to London (Enter Stevens in a 500-Year-Old Bavarian Tree)

BART EECKHOUT

ONE OF THE more exciting publication projects that are currently in the pipeline is *Wallace Stevens in Context*, a volume with thirty-seven contributions to be edited by Glen MacLeod for Cambridge University Press. Having been commissioned to write the chapter on Stevens' international reputation, I am keeping my antennae up to catch the most interesting manifestations of Stevens' fame outside the United States. As a result, when in early November 2014 the officers of the Wallace Stevens Society received an invitation to attend a "special event" on Stevens in London, I was naturally tempted to go. For a Belgian resident, the Eurostar train connection underneath the Channel makes a quick round trip very easy.

Two aspects of the event in particular appealed to me: the lineup of speakers and the location. The four speakers' diverse backgrounds promised to deliver unpredictable results. There was, to be sure, the inevitable academic specializing in American literature, here in the guise of Sarah Churchwell, who is also known as a literary journalist regularly appearing on British TV and radio. But even in her case, it was hard to foresee what exactly she might say as someone who is not an expert on Stevens (her latest book is on *The Great Gatsby*); the program merely announced she would be "providing a Modernist context from which to view Wallace Stevens."<sup>1</sup> Almost as inevitably, there was a British poet on call, though the name of Lachlan Mackinnon has not been circulating much in Stevesian circles either—unless you happen to have an elephant's memory and recall that his *TLS* review of Aidan Wasley's *The Age of Auden* was quoted in the pages of this journal, including a not very flattering comment about "the meagreness of Stevens's thought considered in the abstract" (26, qtd. in Eeckhout and Goldfarb 128). Given Mackinnon's snide remark in the *TLS*, it was interesting to see what would happen when the same poet was invited to "explor[e] the poetic detail of Stevens' work." Yet the two participants to whom I was most looking forward were almost sure to shine a new light on Stevens' afterlife in British art and letters. One was the visual artist Christopher Le Brun, President of the Royal Academy of Arts, who

was going to talk about “the influence of Wallace Stevens on modern and contemporary artists.” The other was one of the most celebrated and original of British novelists and short story writers today, Ali Smith, already three times shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, who would “discuss the influence of Stevens on her own work.” As far as I know, Stevens appears only fleetingly in contemporary fiction; I recall how he flits through Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World*, Samuel Delany’s *Dark Reflections*, and Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home*, but am at a loss to think of a single instance that has been the object of serious critical discussion. So I was eager to hear a leading fiction writer outside the U.S. confessing to a genuine sense of influence.

Before I report on any of the things said (and not said, as we will see) by the four illustrious speakers, I would like to take some time to reflect on the second attraction exerted by the event: its venue, which opened only in 2008 and was unknown to me before my being invited to it. One of my favorite Stevens quotations is from the 29-year-old would-be writer in New York City who had no idea yet where his literary ambitions, love life, or travels were going to take him: “I should mope in Paradise (possibly) if I were to die without first having been to London,” he wrote in a letter to Elsie (*Contemplated Spouse* 141). The luxury of hindsight allows us to smile at the idea that, almost fifty years later, Stevens would die without ever having crossed the Atlantic—but also at the fact that, another sixty years later, the poetry he had written is still being quoted in a journal devoted to his work, where he is heard sighing from that same hypothetical Paradise, now as one of the “ghosts that returned to earth to hear his [own] phrases” and “that would have wept to step barefoot into reality” (*CPP* 365). What kind of reality did Stevens’ barefoot ghost step into on the evening of November 17, 2014, during his long-awaited visit to London?

If, as we might assume, Stevens would have gone to Paris first, he would have chosen to arrive in London by Eurostar (a shorter trip, in duration, than his habitual train rides between Hartford and New York). Thus, he would have gotten off at St. Pancras International, in one of the city’s most glorious public spaces (the Victorian style would have felt very familiar), and been able to stroll to the venue in almost no time. For the *Wallace Stevens Event* was programmed at Kings Place, a mere five-minute walk along the eastern side of King’s Cross Station, whose main entrance sits immediately next to St. Pancras.

Because of my background in urban studies and general interest in contemporary architecture, I was drawn to the event partly as an occasion to study the material and cultural circumstances in which a poet such as Stevens today emerges in a place such as London. How does he fit into what the urban sociologist Sharon Zukin has described as a “symbolic economy” devised by “place entrepreneurs” (7)? Characteristic of this economy, in Zukin’s definition, is “its symbiosis of image and product, the scope and scale of selling images on a national and even global level,

and the role of the symbolic economy in speaking for, or representing, the city" (8). All I had to do was watch the online audio and video guide in which the property developer of Kings Place explained about his project to hear the typical rhetoric that comes with such urban redevelopments—a rhetoric about the area being historically a major transport hub, about how the rerouting of Eurostar trains from Waterloo Station to St. Pancras changed the shops and people in the neighborhood overnight, and about how Kings Place has been constructed in what is "definitely going to be one of the most exciting areas of London in the next ten to fifteen years" (this already back in 2008).

Kings Place, as it has decided to call itself (without apostrophe and usually without capitals), is part of a postindustrial redevelopment project typically driven by economic and real-estate interests.<sup>2</sup> It is huddled up in what was likely an unattractive corner (a sort of urban armpit) between the railroad tracks converging in the King's Cross terminal and the attached Regents Canal and Battlebridge Basin, which, in a distant industrial era, allowed for the freight of trains to be unloaded directly onto boats. In this postindustrial corner, what has arisen is a glitzy, multivolume structure that combines office space with the kind of mixed cultural use flagged up in the tagline of Kings Place as *music+art+restaurants*. In the seven floors of open landscape offices above ground level, a global footwear manufacturer such as Wolverine sits cheek by jowl with two of the U.K.'s leading newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

No less typically, this mixed-use building also proves to be Janus-faced: it has a street side and a back side impossible to associate with each other. The street side is spectacular and iconic: the three-layered undulating façade is made up of hundreds of slightly curved sheets of glass (produced in a factory near Venice, so the website kindly informs us, unaware of the way Stevens conjured up "a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna / Or Venice" half a century ago [*CPP* 471]). The undulating glass façade is meant to be at once beautiful, attention-getting, and ecologically responsible (it diminishes the need for air conditioning).

Stepping inside through the main entrance creates a very different spatial sensation: what suddenly stretches out before the visitor is a large interior space, a semipublic street flowering into a high atrium that pulls the eyes at once upwards and downwards. Upwards you look into the bustling office spaces, downwards into two large basement levels accessible by long escalators. The architectural style of this atrium is clearly indebted to the sleek and expensive, generically white, abstract-modernist tradition that Richard Meier has turned into his trademark around the globe. (The complex is not by Meier but by the local architectural firm of Dixon Jones, whose experience with cultural institutions includes redesigns of the Royal Opera House and the National Gallery. According to the architects' website, the complex of buildings we have just entered is a £97 million project. In a twist on Stevens' most infamous aphorism, you could

say that if money is not always a kind of poetry, here at least it prepares the stage for it.)

Besides feeling the grand pull of this vertical axis, the visitor is also pulled forward into the rotunda that constitutes the building's back side. Here the curved restaurant and bar give out onto al fresco seating that overlooks the Battlebridge Basin and Regents Canal waterfront. The basin, quiet as a pond, is full of slender antique houseboats. On the night of my visit, two sleeping swans float in it, their heads retracted into their plumage so that they look like outsize meringues drifting aimlessly through the water. The brand-new apartments with glass curtain walls on the other side of the basin look resolutely unaffordable. The rotunda and adjacent offices on the waterfront side have a radically different look from the wavy Venetian glass along York Way: they are in a sturdy beige limestone and assume classical geometrical shapes (cuboid-cylinder-cuboid). The ambience on this side of the building is one I am inclined to label *gentrified metropolitan picturesque*: while most of the material components are generic and formulaic, symbolizing a recognizable sort of transnational luxury lifestyle, the elegantly decorated houseboats add a local pictorial touch to the scene, as if the whole were London's postmodern riff on Venice.

Yet before we wind down the evening with cocktails at the waterfront, we should turn back first and descend the escalator into the basement levels.<sup>3</sup> This is where Kings Place as a newfangled cultural hub comes into its own. We have already passed the sculpture exhibition gallery by the entrance (called Pangolin London), but the two levels of the commercial Kings Place Gallery that surround us on all four sides while we descend the escalator are much more striking. On the evening of my visit, the dozens of paintings on the walls are all by a single artist, the Norwegian figurative painter Frans Widerberg, promoted as a twenty-first-century heir of Edvard Munch (who else?). The paintings have a strong unifying effect on the gallery spaces by being all in a mix of the same three primary colors (red, yellow, blue), so that I am reminded of at least one way in which Stevens' artistic appeal continues unabated: his favorite genre of variations on a theme has not lost any of its attraction for artists who wish to affirm their unique creativity, virtuoso craftsmanship, obsessive search for an adequate aesthetic language, and flexibility of spirit and imagination. To be transported downwards into a cyclorama of painterly variations on a few colors and the same semi-figurative shapes can feel remarkably like easing into a comfy chair for another reading of "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

The escalator drops us off at the lowest level, where the two event halls are located. The main hall, where the Stevens gathering is about to take place, is the principal architectural draw for me. Here it is that the first public concert hall in London has been built in over a quarter of a century, entirely below street level (in a conspicuous spatial reversal of Karl Marx's dictum that all cultural superstructures emerge on top of an economic base). As an aficionado of the world's greatest concert-hall acoustics (from

Vienna's *Musikverein* to Amsterdam's *Concertgebouw*), I am curious to find out what the architect and the acoustical engineers of Arup have managed to come up with in the era of computer simulations. Hall One is our destination and I marvel at the challenge of creating such a multipurpose space, which should accommodate not only spoken-word programs, stand-up comedy, piano recitals, folk, jazz, and world music, but also two musical ensembles with utterly different acoustical profiles that have made this their home: the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (celebrated for its performance on period instruments) and the London Sinfonietta (no less admired for its premieres of contemporary classical music).

Hall One turns out to have the size of a chamber music hall; it seats 420 people. Upon entering it, I immediately recognize the shoebox shape (roughly two cubes) that I know to be one of the lessons in acoustics taught by the world's best concert halls. I also recognize the stylized, abstracted language of a well-worn neoclassical tradition in architecture, with Nordic influences in the design style (we could be in Scandinavia as well). I see the same pale wood all around, from the coffered ceiling to the surrounding pillars above the wall paneling down to the parquet floor and the backs of seats—and I know that this, too, is elementary for producing good acoustics. The hall appears to be a warm and plush ritual space, ideally prepared for the secular-artistic variant of collective praying that is about to take place here.

Still, there is only so much one can grasp through direct observation: to learn the larger story of the hall's construction, I need to go online afterwards. Then I begin to understand also why it has been pushed entirely underground (to prevent street noise from coming in) and how it avoids acoustic interference from the railroad tracks nearby (by resting on rubber springs so that the entire hall "floats" within the building). I begin to grasp the purpose of the curtains pulled behind the pillars: they are there to mute the acoustics during spoken-word events and are pulled away for musical performances, when the sound requires a richer echo. And I learn what I cannot resist staging in my column's title because it provides a fanciful little narrative where none is expected: all the woodwork in the hall, from ceiling to walls to floors and backs of seats, derives from a single 500-year-old oak tree in an ancient Bavarian hunting forest, named "Contessa" by its owners. Contessa, we are told, was respectfully felled on the full moon before Christmas in 2005. After her timber was boiled for a full week, she delivered an acre of superb veneer. What a remarkable stage entrance this suddenly turns out to be: Stevens finally arrives in London to be celebrated inside the belly of a pre-Shakespearean oak tree by the name of Contessa. He would have wept to step barefoot on the parquet floor, touch the wood, enjoy the hum of this humane temple for the arts.

To be sure, he might also have been taken aback a little by the large projection of his face on the big screen lowered above the stage, though he would probably have appreciated its being linked to a poetic epigraph

(repeated in the brochure and on the website announcing the event): “Ourselves in poetry must take their place, [ / ] Even in the chattering of your guitar.” There is no mention of this being the conclusion of section V of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” nor of the preceding, contextually and grammatically required lines, though these happen to add to the significance of the concert hall, with its secular-aesthetic rituals, in which we find ourselves:

### Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place  
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,  
Even in the chattering of your guitar.

(CPP 137)

The brochure for the event reproduces Picasso’s *The Old Guitarist* on the cover and tells us, “Poet in the City presents Wallace Stevens: poet, insurance broker, philosopher of the imagination.” (I suspect the insurance broker is there to attract a few extra visitors from the offices overhead.) “Poet in the City,” we learn, “is a registered charity committed to attracting new audiences to poetry, making new connections for poetry, and raising money to support poetry education.” It is housed at the Kings Place Music Foundation and supported by the Arts Council England. A leaflet with “Poet in the City 2014 Highlights” picked up in the atrium allows me to contextualize Stevens’ appearance: his is apparently the only such event devoted to a canonical American poet in 2014. The nine other highlights are a centenary celebration of Dylan Thomas, a Chaucer event *extra muros* at Southwark Cathedral, the poetry and songs of P. G. Wodehouse, a tribute to Seamus Heaney, an event on Viking Sagas at the British Museum, a Cavafy event, a celebration of poetry and fine art under the title “Poetry Portraits,” “First World War: Poetry in Translation,” and newly commissioned poems from London archives, featuring the former poet laureate Sir Andrew Motion.<sup>4</sup>

For £11.50 at the box office and £9.50 if booked online, all Londoners have been invited to enjoy Stevens as (literally) an underground poet cozily snuggling up inside a Contessa, somewhere beside railroad tracks and waterways in a brightly redeveloped armpit of the city. About 150 people show up, which does not seem all that bad to me for a paying event on an ordinary Monday in November at the somewhat impractical hour of 7 p.m. Predictably, a majority in the audience turn out to be gray-haired, though I am amused to notice a group of arty, gay-looking twinks as well (maybe these attend Central St. Martins, one of the art colleges that moved

into the area in 2011). The gender balance seems fine, but I am unable to spy a single person of color in the room, in spite of the community outreach program Kings Place is running. Suddenly, I find myself wishing it were possible to have Stevens speak also to multiethnic London, not just to a white cultural elite with a particular educational pedigree that enjoys visiting creative hubs soaking in money. I feel caught out and branded.

Still, there is pleasure in observing this devoutly concentrated audience over the next hour and a half. Doing so reminds me, for instance, both of the amateur enthusiast and of the serendipitous non-expert. The former is in evidence whenever a title of a famous poem by Stevens draws audible gasps of approval. Such spontaneous displays of enthusiasm contribute notably to the overall atmosphere of celebration. The latter is especially striking whenever lines are read out that display Stevens' typical humor. At an academic conference, nobody will burst into laughter because everybody anticipates the lines, but with a general literary audience in a humor-loving culture such as the British, this is charmingly different. The mere announcement of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is enough to draw chuckles, and many listeners around me laugh out loud at hearing the poem's concluding lines:

This will make widows wince. But fictive things  
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.  
(CPP 47)

This mix of irreverence and verbal fun is clearly one that a sympathetic British audience relishes.

Stevens' poems are read out by the American actor David Calvitto, who opens the evening—before anything else is said—by reciting "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Calvitto will read three more times over the course of the evening, for a total of nineteen poems. With the exception of the preface to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," these are all individual lyrics. Despite the event's epigraph from "The Man with the Blue Guitar," then, the audience is not really given a sense of Stevens' variational technique in the longer poems (unless through the elliptical alternative of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"). At first, it would appear also that the selection of recited poems is heavily weighted toward *Harmonium*: six of the first seven poems are from Stevens' debut collection. But the audience is not provided with dates or titles of collections, or with any sense of development: later in the program, the recited poems will jump around from "The Latest Freed Man" (1938) to "Thirteen Ways" (1917) to "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" (1941) to "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1951). Gradually also, the recitations will become the least rewarding part of the evening for me. Calvitto sounds poorly prepared and struggles with the materials in front of him: he accentuates too many words, reads too fast, misreads words and then has to correct himself, at



times gets lost in Stevens' meandering syntax. Even a professional actor, it turns out, cannot sight-read Stevens: these lines are a complex score that needs to be studied first to identify unexpected and obscure words, check pronunciations, and develop the right sense of musical phrasing. By the time we listen to "The Idea of Order at Key West," where Calvitto trips over "she" versus "sea," I am wishing some of Stevens' own recordings had been played in this pleasant musical space. The audience was ready, I think, for a good haunting.

Calvitto's initiating recitation of "The Emperor" (in which "concupiscent" is immediately mispronounced) is followed by a brief welcome from Jeffery Sugarman, the event manager of the evening, who tells us that he grew up in Florida but got to know Stevens' work only some ten years ago; since then he has been addicted to what he calls Stevens' "devilishly American" qualities as a poet (the first surprising characterization of the evening). Sugarman also brings the disappointing news that Ali Smith has had to cancel due to illness. (So much for building up suspense, both in the run-up to my own visit and for the reader of this column.) The audience will have to make do with Churchwell, Mackinnon, and Le Brun, in that order.

To kick off her exploration of Stevens' place in American culture, Churchwell makes deft use of a phrase by Marianne Moore, who is supposed to have described Stevens once as "equipoise itself."<sup>5</sup> Although Churchwell calls Stevens, in the usual reductive cliché, "a conservative lawyer," she does so only to contrast this with one of his fundamental claims as an artist: "All poetry is experimental poetry" (*CPP* 918). The brief biographical portrait Churchwell then draws up has its dubious spots, for instance when she suggests Stevens studied law at Harvard. More interesting is her personal appreciation of the poet, since this is the kind of language that must kindle the audience's interest in Stevens' writings: after hailing both his comic side and his defiance of modernist dicta, she calls his work "incredibly consoling." Stevens' work does not offer an "empty fantasy" to Churchwell; it demonstrates, rather, how art is able to provide a constant "defense against tragedy." In this regard, he should not be labeled a modernist, which Churchwell dismisses as "an insufficient hook upon which to catch him." More relevant to her is the influence of French symbolism on his work, particularly as it afforded a place in his writings for the irrational.

As a professor of American literature, Churchwell proves good at painting the inferiority complex of American writers around the turn of the twentieth century. Her disciplinary background may also account for her insistence that Stevens is "American to his core" and that *Harmonium* is "of the American soil," though she quickly qualifies this by pointing to the poet's simultaneously "more global perspective." Churchwell goes on to align Stevens' reticence with Emily Dickinson's (a helpful way of letting her listeners develop a quick mental image) but gets carried away when

she adds that he also “greatly admired” Dickinson. (In all of his published journals and letters, Stevens never once mentions her. As Joan Richardson reminds us, “both Whitman and Dickinson were largely ignored by Stevens’s generation” [126].) When Churchwell mentions that it took the *New York Times* eight years to review *Harmonium*, she draws a few sniggers—and probably diminishes the sense of intimidation some of the audience still experience vis-à-vis Stevens’ work.

Drawing inspiration from Helen Vendler, Churchwell assures her audience that the widespread image of a dispassionate Stevens has now been displaced by a sadder figure, whose work records especially disappointment and longing, besides hope. In her opinion, he is also “one of the first great American poets of perception,” most famously in poems such as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Yet the most provocative claim Churchwell wishes to make, by her own admission, is that Stevens should be regarded as an “anti-Whitman,” mainly because he is “anti-grandiose.” She rounds off her sketch by adding that music and prosody are central to the greatness of Stevens’ poetry, and that he is very much a poet of the senses. In a clever rhetorical maneuver, Churchwell wraps up her talk by reading out some of her personal favorites from Stevens’ “Adagia,” ranging from “The poet makes silk dresses out of worms” and “Authors are actors, books are theatres” to “Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble” (*CPP* 900–01)—a self-disparagement that goes down well with a British audience and draws further laughter from the auditorium.

After the first batch of recited poems, Mackinnon takes over in a heavy Oxbridge accent that makes his Scottish background perfectly inaudible. With practiced laconic wit he improvises on the basis of a few scribbles, asking the audience to imagine a man walking through a park in Hartford every morning on his way to work and looking “like a Platonic idea of an Eisenhower conservative.”<sup>6</sup> Mackinnon makes his listeners chortle again when he tells of the fistfight with Ernest Hemingway and the quarrels with Robert Frost at Key West. Taking biographical liberties, he says that Stevens as a rule skipped lunch to go walk in the park (as if Elizabeth Park had been next-door to the office), arriving back with a few scribbled lines of verse for his secretary to type up. One such poem might be called “Of Hartford in a Purple Light.” Immediately, it becomes clear that, despite the witty approach, Mackinnon has no wish to disparage the poetic results. He may be idiosyncratic in his claims about the poem—its use of French words was “learned from Whitman,” the ideas expressed in it are “almost serious,” and the address to the sun is “old-fashioned”—but he builds up such remarks so as to prepare for a full reading of the text that turns out to be much livelier and more dramatic than Calvito’s performances.

Mackinnon’s Stevens is nevertheless recognizably British: we must understand this was a man who refused to take himself quite seriously. His marriage, moreover, was “a catastrophe”—perhaps another marker

of poetic genius in the country of Philip Larkin. Yet once again, such observations are tossed off as mere interludes because, as a poet, Mackinnon wants to get to the more important question of what poetry was doing for Stevens. He suggests two different answers. On the one hand, poetry for Stevens could bring “a new knowledge of reality.” Spiraling back to “Of Hartford in a Purple Light,” Mackinnon aligns Stevens with Oscar Wilde’s aestheticist claim that nature imitates art, and presents him as “emphatically post-Nietzschean.” Here Mackinnon’s praise is unmitigated and stated without a trace of irony: Stevens’ belief in a “supreme fiction,” embraced in the full awareness of its being a fiction, “requires a lot of courage, which Stevens had.” It also requires that a poet dare to engage in a “game with the reader,” for “Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully” (CPP 910). This makes for a demanding poetry, Mackinnon admits, in which the reading experience is “like trying to crack the world.” On the other hand, poetry for Stevens had to do something very different: it had to find “an object adequate to the imagination.” In this respect, Stevens was arguably more of a romantic than a modernist, which Mackinnon illustrates by going on to recite “Of Modern Poetry” in its entirety. To the closing lines about “a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / Combing” (CPP 219), he adds how much he loves their “domestic genre painting”—and how, in Stevens’ buildup of the poem, these unspectacular images might actually be good enough to “meet our capacity for wonder.”

Mackinnon ends with a local pirouette about Stevens’ influence in England. After a dizzying spin on Aubrey Beardsley, Franz Kafka, and Stevens as “literary insurance businessmen,” he lands on the poet Roy Fuller (1912–1991), who was a “company solicitor” for “the Woolwich” (one of the U.K.’s largest and oldest building societies). Too few readers, according to Mackinnon, are aware that the later poetry of Fuller (who moved from lawyering to being a poetry professor at Oxford) is “very clearly influenced by Stevens,” and so Mackinnon urges his audience to reread these later verses through the American poet’s lenses. It is a suggestion worth repeating in the pages of this journal.

Meanwhile, it is time again for Calvitto to step up to the plate and read his final batch of poems before the least predictable of the three speakers is allowed to bring the evening to a satisfying conclusion. Christopher Le Brun (°1951) is a painter, sculptor, and printmaker who was born in Portsmouth and trained at the Slade and Chelsea art schools in London.<sup>7</sup> He has been appearing in international solo exhibitions since the early 1980s, and served as a trustee of the Tate and the National Gallery in the 1990s and early 2000s. A good ten years after becoming a Professor of Drawing at the Royal Academy in 2000, he was elected the 26th President of this institution since Sir Joshua Reynolds, the youngest artist in this position since 1878. Le Brun has brought along five images to be projected during his talk, three from canonical painters (a depiction of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire by Cézanne, a Braque painting, another by Robert Motherwell)

and two of his own large-scale oil paintings made at very different stages of his career. The first of these, *Thorn*, dates from 1984–85 and is reprinted on the cover of this issue; the second, *Enter the City*, is a recent abstract composition in yellow, orange, and red from 2014 (at the time of writing, it may be viewed on the artist's website).

Le Brun announces he would like to talk about how as a young artist in the 1970s he encountered Stevens' work and "how it related to me as an artist and to the situation of painting at that time." "Essentially," he says, this boils down to "how his work helped me." Ad-libbing a link with the final line from "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" just read by Calvitto, in which Stevens "Recognize[s] his unique and solitary home" (CPP 435), Le Brun tells his hearers how in turn he has recognized a home in Stevens' work for decades. The Cézanne that is up on the screen builds a further visual link with Stevens' poem. Cézanne is the best point to start, Le Brun feels, because of his special significance for both Stevens and the birth of modern art. After all, this painter may be said to have established

the independent existence of the painting as a thing in the world, and as an object that connects, not as a copy but as something parallel or equivalent or speaking to the world, and not of a lesser order or significance. It is not an illustration. It doesn't fetch and carry for others. It is profoundly resistant to explanation. To recall the imagery of the poet David Gascoyne, it is both a wall, a wood, and a well.

Le Brun reminisces how as a young artist arriving in London from the provinces he read poets—especially the English romantics—voraciously, but was soon told he should stop the habit immediately. Coming across Stevens' poetry, nevertheless, he found in the work "tremendous support" for his own "instincts" as an artist. Stevens helped Le Brun resist the three dominant trends at the Slade School of Fine Art at the time: one pushed him in the direction of a hard-won realistic scrutiny, another toward irony and pop art, and a third toward American-style abstract painting. While his own early painting *Thorn*, alluding to the winged horse Pegasus, is projected on the screen, Le Brun tells us of his passionate if secretive immersion in Stevens. He recalls how his teacher at the Slade, in the "English tradition of particularism," demanded to know whether a wing he had painted was that of an eagle, a goose, or a flamingo, while Le Brun wanted (but did not dare) to answer it was the Wing of Poetry. As a result, Le Brun was all the more excited recently to discover a sentence Stevens wrote in "A Collect of Philosophy": "That the wing of poetry should also be the rushing wing of meaning seems to be an extreme aesthetic good" (CPP 854). Back in the 1970s, it was especially Stevens' essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" that gave Le Brun a language and a framework for his artistic instincts: as a visual artist he felt that his own

“compulsion to imagine pictures and make them” was “entirely substantiated” in this essay. Pointing to the opening page of Stevens’ essay, which conjures up the image of “a pair of winged horses and a charioteer” from Plato’s *Phaedrus* (CPP 643), Le Brun nods at his own *Thorn* by saying, “There are no prizes for guessing how this may have influenced me.” He goes on to explain:

The separation of the image, in this case noble and resplendent in itself, from what it might or might not carry, and that the image nevertheless satisfies an overwhelming need, is one of the lessons of cubism. . . . So for the painter who feels that the imaginative impulse is supreme, how does the cultural stage, his context of performance, appear? The ambitious young person proceeds to look and to read because, in preparation for this lifelong journey towards the distant mountain, only the best of art and writing should be packed and learned and remembered.

One poetic opponent Le Brun needed to overcome while packing for his journey as an artist was Philip Larkin, who jettisoned “tradition” and the “common myth-kitty” from antiquity and the Bible, and instead called for artists who did not “dodge” their “duty to be original.” Against this, Le Brun quotes the poet C. H. Sisson’s riposte, which marshaled Sir Philip Sidney’s “An Apology for Poetry” to defend the invention of “forms such as never were in Nature” (from demigods to chimeras and winged horses). More generally, Le Brun wishes to insist on the value of “bringing something new into the world” as against merely “preserving” personal experiences. He calls this “a key dilemma of contemporary art” as it has developed in his lifetime. To illustrate this, he refers to an epic-scale example of Wagnerian proportions that rather matches the image of *Thorn* on the screen and the audience’s coincidental huddling up inside a Bavarian tree: “Anyone who has seen the Anselm Kiefer exhibition now at the Royal Academy has witnessed the resurgence of history painting like a counterreformation. Kiefer, of course, has the biggest, vastest myth-kitty of them all.”<sup>8</sup>

The image on the screen switches to an abstract painting by Motherwell, which allows Le Brun to pursue Stevens’ relation to American abstraction. Here he seems to be in agreement, by and large, with Al Filreis’ work on the topic: Le Brun explains how Stevens in the late 1940s and early ’50s continued to buy pictures from Paris instead of following the art world’s turn to New York. Stevens proved to be “equivocal” about the evolution toward full abstraction even as he prepared the path for it. If Motherwell (who wrote about Stevens already in the 1940s) could suggest that the beauty of American painting was “how it stands alone” and cannot be reduced to a national origin, Stevens had things to say about

how this beauty must resist the observer. Like Mackinnon, Le Brun quotes the epigram “Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully” (CPP 910). In Le Brun’s estimation, this claim, which stops short of absolute abstraction, is “enormously helpful for a painter,” and its key word, *almost*, is a very humane one. Motherwell’s kind of abstraction, Le Brun concludes, may have been ahead of Stevens, yet it was arguably also influenced by him.

Under the final projected image of Le Brun’s own abstract, vibrantly colorful *Enter the City*, the artist tells us how Stevens is ultimately “on the side of the maker,” and that this maker, in the case of the painter, “does not require a correspondence with a previous experience for validation because the experience of imagining and building is what is required, not as a record but for the pleasure of performance and of acting out.” These words about imagining, building, pleasure, and performance strike me as felicitous terms to bring a spoken-word celebration of Stevens’ poetry inside a performance hall to a conclusion, and I ponder how the projected image of a richly imaginative artistic force “entering the city,” with its own abstract way of resisting the intelligence almost successfully, adds beautifully to the manner in which Stevens’ immaterial presence is being evoked during this belated visit to London. The yellow, orange, and red colors that have erupted on the screen allow Le Brun to reaffirm his attachment to the conclusion of “The Noble Rider,” where nobility is described as an artistic force:

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (CPP 665)

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Here and in the rest of this column, a number of quotations from the program brochure are included without further bibliographical reference. Internal textual evidence should be sufficient to understand that words are being quoted from this source.

<sup>2</sup>The following description has been composed on the basis of three sources: the Kings Place website ([www.kingsplace.co.uk](http://www.kingsplace.co.uk)), the *Wikipedia* entry on Kings Place, and my own observations on the evening of November 17, 2014. The website information was accessed on November 21, 2014.

<sup>3</sup>According to the Kings Place website, this is the deepest single propped basement ever built in London.

<sup>4</sup>The “Words on Monday” series contains more than poetry events alone: a leaflet for the period September–November 2014 lists seventeen evenings, including famous

British writers such as Julian Barnes, Sebastian Faulks, Louis de Bernières, and Wendy Cope, discussions with a historian, a composer, and a philosopher, book launches with global subject matter (a novel on Sri Lanka's civil war, another on Algerian women and immigration to Europe), an introduction to a living Brazilian poet, and a not very literary evening in the company of the "Technology entrepreneur and co-founder of PayPal, Peter Thiel," who "imparts lessons" on "principles that are fundamental to building valuable companies."

<sup>5</sup>All quotations from Churchwell are based on my notes and are thus approximate.

<sup>6</sup>As with Churchwell, all quotations by Mackinnon are based on my notes.

<sup>7</sup>The information in my biographical sketch of Le Brun has been composed from the artist's website ([christopherlebrun.co.uk](http://christopherlebrun.co.uk)) and the *Wikipedia* page devoted to him. In what follows, I will be able to cite the artist's words at length and with complete accuracy thanks to the preparatory notes he sent me and his vetting of all quotations. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Le Brun for his kind cooperation as well as for the enthusiasm with which he met my request to publish a reproduction of *Thorn* on the cover of this issue of the Journal.

<sup>8</sup>The Kiefer exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts ran from September 27 to December 14, 2014, and offered the most significant overview of the German artist's career until then in the U.K.

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