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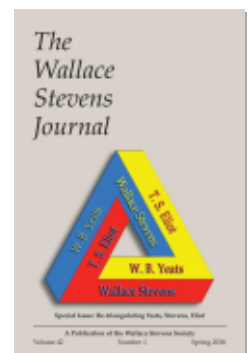
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Wallace Stevens Journal, Volume 42, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 31-45 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsj.2018.0003>



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## Crazy Jane and Professor Eucalyptus: Self-Dissolution in the Later Poetry of Yeats and Stevens

MARGARET MILLS HARPER

. . . all talk about God, whether pro or anti, is twaddle.  
—Wallace Stevens, quoting Professor Joad

*Fol de rol, fol de rol.*  
—W. B. Yeats, “Crazy Jane Reproved”

PARTICULARLY IN THE TWO magisterial volumes *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, the later W. B. Yeats is a poet who might be typified by the weighty line, the bardic voice, forms like the poised *ottava rima* and meditative style that Helen Vendler calls “spacious” (*Our Sacred Discipline* 291). Late Wallace Stevens moves into sparer variants of his ongoing poetic preoccupations, offering himself as “a diffident minimalist,” in Charles Altieri’s phrase (321), substituting purification for harmonium. These are overgeneralizations, of course. A parallel that interests me appears if I juxtapose two late sequences, focusing especially on each poet’s late reworking, or redramatizing, of the poetic subject. The two texts I will consider are Yeats’s *Words for Music Perhaps* and Stevens’s “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” They are not stylistically or thematically similar, though both represent somewhat analogous moments in each poet’s career. Considered together, Yeats’s Crazy Jane poems in particular (which form a large part of the sequence *Words for Music Perhaps*) and Stevens’s multi-canto “An Ordinary Evening” represent ambitious experiments in creating dissolution by two wielders of powerful language. Both works explore the paradox implicit in highly skilled poets confronting the absence of the imagination, the seeming opposite of everything their abilities can and do make possible.<sup>1</sup>

For Yeats, the effort involved following the magisterial poems of *The Tower* with the abjection and exultation of a different kind of mask, a different style, and arguably a different approach toward composition, than he had tried before. *Words for Music Perhaps* was published by Cuala Press in 1932 and then included in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), two years before Yeats’s seventieth birthday. The title of the sequence is ironically misleading: the twenty-five short poems of the sequence are not

meant to be set to music—hence Yeats’s playful “Perhaps.” In March 1929, the poet wrote his old friend Olivia Shakespear, “I am writing *Twelve poems for music*—have done three of them (and two other poems)—no[t] so much that they may be sung as that I may define their kind of emotion to myself. I want them to be all emotion and all impersonal” (*Letters* 758). Indeed, the idea of Yeats writing for music seems to have amused both himself and his wife. R. F. Foster quotes George Yeats writing to Thomas McGreevy, a good friend, that “William . . . yesterday came dashing along from his cot to announce that he was going to write twelve songs and I had got to purchase ‘a musical instrument’ at once and set them to music. . . . All said songs being of a most frivolous nature!” (letter from February 11, 1929, qtd. in Foster 385). Given that she did not play a musical instrument, not to mention that it seems not to have mattered *which* musical instrument she was meant to buy, “frivolous” might be an understatement.

The twenty-five short poems of *Words for Music Perhaps* are technically very unlike some of Yeats’s weighty and serious late poems, including the poems in magisterial *ottava rima* like “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” or “Coole Park, 1929” and “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931.” The poems that comprise *Words for Music Perhaps* are light and somewhat tune-like, with short stanzas, frequent uses of refrain, and tetrameter or trimeter rhyming lines suggestive of ballads or Shakespearean songs. The little lyrics are anything but frivolous, though. Instead, their light touch is part of a spiritual/intellectual purpose that includes the question of words’ inherent musicality. The sequence foregrounds the idea of simple joy as wisdom, which is common to Yeats’s late work. As an oft-cited (and often misquoted) passage in one of his last letters puts it,

I am happy, and I think full of an energy, of an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence. . . . (*Letters* 922)<sup>2</sup>

Other philosophical motifs include two ideas that I suggest resonate with Stevens: first, that souls create reality, by means of images or thoughts, and, in Yeats’s thinking, through many lives; and, second, that truths must be local and temporally specific even though reality is spaceless and timeless. In late Yeats, the particular self (or ego, or will, to use terms from his occult treatise *A Vision*) is always in dialogue with the soul (that aspect of the human being that is timeless and spaceless). The opposition between these two is also a cooperation or refraction: the one requires the other. There is thus a continual interaction between multiplicity and singularity, that old Platonic canard. Indeed, Yeats had been reading a good deal of

Plato, as well as Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, as part of the research for revising *A Vision*, whose second edition, very different from the first, was published in 1937 after a decade of work.

Stevens, writing in the wake of "Credences of Summer" and "The Auroras of Autumn," had extended further than before the pursuit of something that he had long admitted "is a constant source of trouble to me": the question of "the relation or balance between imagined things and real things," as he put it to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935 (L 316). "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" was composed in his seventieth year; so not only ability but also age was at play, as it was for Yeats. As is well known, "An Ordinary Evening" was published twice: in a shorter version in 1949 and then in the volume *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1950. Twenty years after George Yeats's breezy letter, Stevens wrote Thomas McGreevy about his experience of composition, suggesting that "An Ordinary Evening" could be thought of as a sequence, not a single poem: "I decided to step out from under the whole thing for a little while. Then, about the same time, perhaps as part of the pleasure of this relaxation, I became interested in doing a poem, which, like most long poems, is merely a collection of short ones, and they went on and on" (L 640).

After the poem was finished, in June 1949, he wrote to Barbara Church,

it is interesting to plan ahead for a long period of thinking and writing and, for me, it is something new because I have always done that sort of thing casually and as part of the experience of living. One of the drawbacks of going about it in this casual and intermittent way is that every fresh beginning is a beginning over: one is always beginning. One of the really significant reasons for devoting one's whole life to poetry in the same way that people devote their whole lives to music or painting is that this steady application brings about a general moving forward. I shall know a little more about this sort of thing by the end of the year. . . . I have just finished one long thing and am ready to go on to the next. (L 639)

Not every reader finds a sense of freshness and progress after application in "An Ordinary Evening." More frequently, readings highlight themes of deprivation and even annihilation, echoing the oft-quoted passage from a letter Stevens had written a month earlier than his comments to Mrs. Church, to Bernard Heringman:

At the moment I am at work on a thing called An Ordinary Evening In New Haven. This is confidential and I don't want the thing to be spoken of. But here my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality

but of plain reality. The object is of course to purge oneself of anything false. I have been doing this since the beginning of March and intend to keep studying the subject and working on it until I am quite through with it. This is not in any sense a turning away from the ideas of *Credences of Summer*: it is a development of those ideas. (L 636–37)

Both letters vibrate with overtones from Christian discourse, from the sense of teleological progress (“a general moving forward” as opposed to “one is always beginning”) to purgation (“of anything false”) as a preliminary stage *en route* to perfection (“until I am quite through with it”).

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This is not to say that Stevens’s poem displays anything like religious belief: debates about faith in one religious tradition or another, whether on the part of Stevens or Yeats, are not to the point. Nonetheless, for Stevens, at least, the *question* of religious belief is part of his discursive economy, in poems as well as letters. Yeats is much happier than Stevens to use words like *soul*, or indeed to posit that soul’s continuation through many lives; but the Irish poet’s work does not display the Protestant modes of thinking that were his familial inheritance (his grandfather and great-grandfather were rectors of the Church of Ireland), at least in terms of this issue. Yeats’s lifelong investments in vernacular religion, Western esotericism, and, at first through the lens of occult societies and later through more direct study, varieties of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, may dispose him less often to consider questions of faith in a deity than Stevens. Put differently, we might say that Yeats is more inclined toward religious orthopraxy, or, to be more precise, ritualism, or even mysticism, than the orthodoxy that is common to Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

For example, poems such as “Byzantium” or the lyrics in *Supernatural Songs* attempt to reproduce in rapturous language the experience of direct encounter with the supernatural:

Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood,  
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
Marbles of the dancing floor  
Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

(VP 498)<sup>4</sup>

Image piles upon image, verbal repetition carrying meaning like a mantra in words and phrases from earlier in the poem (*mire, blood, golden, fury/furies, complexities/complexity, begotten/beget, image/images*) as well as in the stanza itself (*spirit, smithies, and break, as well as near echoes like flood/floor or torn/tormented*). Sonority and rhythm rather than logical or even temporal sequence replace intellectual or even emotional assent as the primary maker of meaning. "What matter that you understood no word!" the hermit Ribh exclaims in "Ribh in Ecstasy," from *Supernatural Songs* (VP 557).

Stevens is more likely to use the terms of Christian emphasis on right belief, even when putting forth his endlessly internet-quotable proposition that "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (CPP 903). The credal statement resembles the aphorism or adage, a form of which Stevens was especially fond.<sup>5</sup> However, Stevens's aphoristic statements often serve as propositions and counterpropositions rather than the seemingly simple statements of faith they impersonate. They condense complex states of feeling or perception into intense statements that often behave more like riddles than explanations. As Beverly Coyle notes, the claims that seem to serve almost as epigrams, summarizing the sense of the first four cantos of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," suggest less that the speaker is certain than that he is "of several minds about his subject" (216–17). Taken together, these non-epigrams embody the "and yet, and yet, and yet—" that follows the first seemingly certain assertion and is actually a decent description of the structure of the poem. Canto I announces, "The eye's plain version is a thing apart, / The vulgate of experience" (CPP 397). The next canto moves in extraordinarily impressionistic, syntactically complex language, yet concludes that the town's "Impalpable habitations" are "So much ourselves, we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea" (CPP 397–98). No thing apart here. In canto III, a one-line sentence sounds plainly informative: "The point of vision and desire are the same" (CPP 398). But canto IV begins, "The plainness of plain things is savagery," not anything as distanced or unappeased as vision or desire (CPP 399).

In other words, the aphorisms do not finally close anything off—the meaning of the root word. Coyle suggests that "a reader responds to a statement as an aphorism essentially because its formal and thematic elements (sound and syntactic properties) create in him [sic] a sense of closure. The word 'aphorism' is derived from the Greek word, *Aphorizein*, to mark off boundaries (i.e., to enclose)" (207–08). However, she continues, "the initial response he [sic] makes to the statement as an aphorism is to a seeming completeness in its linguistic structure—a response produced by sound and syntax—and need not include his perception of meaning" (208). The illusion of certainty created by the linguistic structure of the

definitive statement is countered by the intellectual uncertainty suggested by the larger structures of apposition. This is the phenomenon Vendler calls Stevens's late "inching style" (*On Extended Wings* 307). Vendler cites Frank Doggett, who in an early essay notes Stevens's characteristic way of proceeding in his late verse by "the recognition of conjunction of ideas, with modifications offered by other successive concepts presented appositively" (147). The impression of item succeeding item is not Whitmanesque abundance, as in Stevens's earlier style with its "piling up of appositional noun phrases to suggest expansiveness and surfeit" (*On Extended Wings* 307). Instead, as Vendler asserts in a more recent essay, the conjunctions Stevens frequently leans on—if, or, and but—"cease for the most part to represent obstacles and become—to put it briefly—accretive, elaborative, and asymptotic instead of alternative and exclusive" ("Wallace Stevens" 113).

They are also performative, in the sense that the poem dramatizes the movement of the speaker's thought. The western lyric poem reinvents or reiterates an experience. It does so through the convention of the impersonated voice of the "poet," as opposed to the human being who writes the words. Yeats's description of this phenomenon—that the poet is "never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast"—is one of the clearest enunciations of this literary function. The notion of the poet as what Yeats calls "something intended, complete" (*Later Essays* 204) extends itself easily into modernist arguments for styles that mimic accident and incoherence, like painterly abstraction. If lyric poems are all self-dramatizations on the part of people assuming the masks of poets, through the device of personified speakers, then the only way to write a poem of reality, as Stevens might call it, is to slip out of the fun house of this constructed speaker or self and the linguistic structures that support it—beginning, perhaps, with sentences with subjects doing verbal work to objects or stretching themselves out into verbal complements.

Yet style is itself a mask. In *On Extended Wings*, Vendler approaches this notion in her close reading of canto XVI of "An Ordinary Evening." In that canto, the "oldest-newest day is the newest alone," and the natural environment of day and night is contrasted with one of the "and yet's": "And yet the wind whimpers oldly of old age / In the western night" (*CPP* 406–07). To Vendler, that whimper is "Stevens' own human voice turned beaten beast," but "When the poet, on the other hand, speaks, it is through the mask, and that mask is, of course, this entire long poem on New Haven" (273). The "venerable mask above / The dilapidation of dilapidations" in this canto, with the etymological foreshadowing of the "dust" with which the poem will end in the word *dilapidation* (*CPP* 406, 417), furthers the sense that beyond the mask is the real of an imaginatively destroyed town as well as the symbolic rock so common in late Stevens.

Poetry that proceeds by analogy, the cognitive move of making one thing equivalent or nearly equivalent (perhaps using *like* or *as* in their



roles as conjunctions), pushes metaphor into the realm of style, serving the same function as Yeats's beloved concept of the mask, or, in its less explicitly dramatized form, poetic voice.<sup>6</sup> Edward Ragg notes that Stevens seized onto the discussion of artistic form in Henri Focillon, underlining a passage in his copy of Hogan and Kubler's translation of Focillon's *La Vie des formes* that states elegantly the concept of style as mask. The passage reads, "In utilizing style as an absolute, we give expression to a very fundamental need: that of beholding ourselves in our widest possible intelligibility . . . our most universal aspect, beyond the fluctuations of history, beyond local and specific limitations."<sup>7</sup>

For Stevens, as Ragg argues (and as Stevens himself was well aware), the continual lure is not, as it was with Yeats, the escape from rag-and-bone shop into dream, so much as the escape into unbodied abstraction. In 1935, Stevens had used the word "danger" to describe his relationship with abstraction, telling Latimer in response to a question about whether art is didactic, "my real danger is not didacticism, but abstraction" (L 302). As with Yeats's poet unencumbered by any actual breakfast, though, it is good to note the touch of self-deprecating humor in Stevens's theorizing. The relation between the personal and the abstract, between "a natural object" and "its poetic characteristics," Stevens goes on to say to Latimer, is like (using the very analogical logic his poetry prefers) "the boy whose mother told him to stop sneezing; he replied: 'I am not sneezing; it's sneezing me'" (L 302). Disembodied, pure abstraction, an always existing but never realizable state, may be the one necessary to the "possible poet" described in the lecture "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," but not anything conceivable or expressible (CPP 656). In 1942, the year following this lecture, Stevens glossed a passage in the first section of the part of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" entitled "It Must Give Pleasure" thus: "The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly as immanent: that is to say, the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract" (L 434). The fluid "inching style" allows Stevens to aim in the direction of, make "Notes" toward, but avoid arriving at a destination beyond stylistic performance into stable, perfect truth.

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That these two writers in their late years produced poetry that rubs against their tendencies to create palaces of the imagination does not mean a fundamental change in the value each placed on those gorgeous structures. Intellectually speaking, Yeats and Stevens have in common a lifelong insistence on the sovereignty of the imagination—and, seemingly, on the sovereignty of the human being who alone can imagine. The possibility



of imaginationlessness, as Stevens famously notes in “The Plain Sense of Things,” has itself to be imagined (*CPP* 428). Yeats makes one of the boldest claims for the power of the imagination in “The Tower,” a poem that in its third part contains one of his very few *credos*:

And I declare my faith:  
I mock Plotinus' thought  
And cry in Plato's teeth,  
Death and life were not  
Till man made up the whole,  
Made lock, stock and barrel  
Out of his bitter soul,  
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,  
And further add to that  
That, being dead, we rise,  
Dream and so create  
Translunar Paradise.

(*VP* 414–15)

Yeats's inheritance from William Blake, among others, of the saving power of the imagination has moved slightly to insist here that it is not the imagination figured as a transfigured Christ but a “bitter soul,” filled with the remorse painfully recalled in the first and second sections of the poem, that makes everything. And by everything, Yeats includes not only reality as encountered by an imagining self but the vastest expanses of the universe—and then, as the spirit rises (like Christ, after all) and dreams after its death, eternal paradise. This exertion of poetic force occurs in pounding trimeter and sets of triples (“lock, stock and barrel,” “sun and moon and star,” “rise, / Dream and so create . . . Paradise”) as well as the binary doubles Plotinus/Plato, “Death and life,” and an alternating rhyme scheme. There is some conceptual trouble, however, which occurs precisely in terms of that shift from transcendence to abjection, the Plotinian soul turned “bitter.” The magisterial form is not adequate to the wild intensity of that bitterness, which, in the final stanza of part II of the poem, undoes the world: “if memory recur, the sun's / Under eclipse and the day blotted out” (*VP* 414).

Enter Crazy Jane, a mask that resembles other well-known masks (such as the ancient Irish warrior Cuchulain) insofar as she is opposite to what the terminology of *A Vision* would term the poet's Primary self. Yeats was a socially privileged Nobel laureate, yet pricked by conscience; his creation Jane is a social outcast, outspoken, defiantly sexual, and flamboyantly unrepentant of her choices in life. According to Elizabeth Cullingford, Jane is “occult, *unheimlich*, and anomalous” (235), transgressing norms and thus socially liminal and dangerous. She is mad (unlike Yeats), with all the ambivalences the category of “mad” brings with it. Like her creator, she sings

of love and posits philosophical ideas that aim to undo binaries, including those of love and hate, good and evil, and life and death.

As the poem "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman" puts it, "love is but a skein unwound / Between the dark and dawn" (VP 511). Endless cycles of freedom and bondage are figured as a skein of wool (with all the resonances between textuality and textiles that underlie that metaphor, including gender norms). The skein is wound—the past tense of *wind*, suggesting echoes of two heteronyms (*wound*, as in injury, and *wind* as moving air), the root meaning of Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin words for spirit or soul—as the gyres of *A Vision* spin around a central point, or as the earth moves around an axis. Winding and unwinding dance in ceaseless relationship to each other. The poem associates this action and counteraction with the paradox of love and loss, bondage and freedom, represented by the image of a door left unlatched (interestingly, one of the first images and lines Yeats worked with as he composed the poem in multiple drafts).<sup>8</sup> This poem, written late in 1931, begins with the speaker, presumably Jane, saying "I know" that a lover's glance moves deep within the body "to the bone," and beyond it and subjectivity itself, returning finally to "the light lost / In my mother's womb" (VP 511). At the same time, as she imagines her body lying in the grave, she claims that human love retains power enough to make the dead walk. As a love poem, this is a frightening turn. If a dialogue between two quarreling voices, as Yeats first drafted it, it seems to have proven too disjunctive: the blend of philosophically distanced and physically intimate material did not cohere. But the plainspoken ferocity of the final version, with first-person statements in short lines with almost the only words of more than one syllable being negations of single-syllable words (*unlatched*, *unwound*), make the form support the outlandish contradictions of the logic:

I know, although when looks meet  
I tremble to the bone,  
The more I leave the door unlatched  
The sooner love is gone,  
For love is but a skein unwound  
Between the dark and dawn.

A lonely ghost the ghost is  
That to God shall come;  
I—love's skein upon the ground,  
My body in the tomb—  
Shall leap into the light lost  
In my mother's womb.

But were I left to lie alone  
In an empty bed,  
The skein so bound us ghost to ghost  
When he turned his head  
Passing on the road that night,  
Mine must walk when dead.

(VP 511)

“Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman” was one of the last poems written before “Byzantium,” with its liminal place of iteration, somewhere between life and death and the impossible conjunctions with which it ends: physical warm-blooded dolphins in real water tormented by the sound of a gong ferrying the newly dead to paradise. At the conclusion of “Byzantium,” marbles of the dancing floor are crazed as Jane is.

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After the poems featuring Crazy Jane were published, Yeats described finding them “exciting and strange” (*Letters* 814). Yeats’s long experience as a dramatist combined with his mastery as a magician to create this voice, which functions both as a mask and something like daemonic possession—or so he wrote George Yeats on December 22, 1931. After discussion of what Christmas presents to buy, he writes that he’s happy to be working again on his own dignified poetry, that

I want to exorcise that slut “Crazy Jane,” whose language has grown unendurable. I am pleased with what I have written. For days I could get nothing & thought I was finished & now I have found a new life. I am reading Balzac, with all my old delight, picking up old acquaintances, & reading Shelley “Prometheus Unbound” with thought of an essay, not Irish notes but something you can send to “The Criterian” [sic]. (*CL InteLex* 5550)

Possessing (in the sense that his voice, of course, speaks through hers) and possessed by Crazy Jane, Yeats was able to move through an impasse with what he perceived as sexual, social, and aesthetic constraints and “sing” some of his late poems.

Stevens’s lower-register version of Yeats’s “sun and moon and star, all” might be summed up in a letter to Hi Simons responding to questions about section VI of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: “Things imagined (the senses of the guitar) become things as they are. This is pretty much the same thing as to say that in the United States everyone sooner or later becomes an American” (*L* 360). Stevens’s prosaic analogy suggests a rela-

tionship that is not as unidirectional as his sentence: Americanness itself changes as it incorporates new Americanness. The idea is in this sense a good deal more Aristotelian than Platonic, more the America of immigration than of advertising—like being sneezed rather than sneezing. In “An Ordinary Evening,” the false dichotomy is presented like Yeats’s Janean unlatched door. It seems as true to assert that, as canto XXII avers, “To re-create, to use // The cold and earliness and bright origin / Is to search” (CPP 411), as it is to say that to search is to create “lock, stock and barrel.” Stevens’s “endlessly elaborating poem” (CPP 415) gives its re-creations and searches as “the edgings and inchings of final form,” *as if* or *toward* or *like*, sketched in the two images of the penultimate stanza, “A philosopher practicing scales on his piano, / A woman writing a note and tearing it up” (CPP 417).

For both Yeats and Stevens, reality is created by the imagination but also inflected by it. Thus, every person—or every subject—or every thing—has its own particular imagination. Every truth has an occasion from which it cannot be separated. It’s only lent, or perhaps rent, the triple-entendre meaning loaned for a price, torn, and rendered in one of the most famous of the *Words for Music Perhaps*, “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop”:

nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent.  
(VP 513)

Some of Yeats’s late obsessions were with the problems this conviction poses: can a truth larger than its creator be spoken by that creator? How can it exceed its moment? Despite the oft-quoted declaration in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” XII that “The poem is the cry of its occasion” (CPP 404), Stevens may be suggesting that the music (music perhaps?) plays a philosopher, as the contents of her note write a woman.

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The scale-practicing philosopher and the note-tearing woman at the end of “An Ordinary Evening” are not randomly chosen illustrations of a general principle. They, too, push back against the abstract propositions that salt the sequence. So do the various figures or personae, or perhaps imagos, that frequent its pages, from giant through lion of Juda, ephebe, carpenter, Ecclesiast, or alphabetical letters to hidalgo. The other semi-subjects, from “exhalations in the eaves” to “the metaphysical streets of the physical town,” also participate in this pushing back (CPP 407, 403).

Of these personae, the figure of Professor Eucalyptus is closest to a Yeatsian mask. The professor, neither a poet nor a resident in any other

town in Connecticut, who is unlikely to succeed in his research project, appears in canto XIV, near the numerical center of the sequence. The professor, named after the tree and also its etymological source (*eu-kalyptos*, well-covered or hidden), looks for words to create/discover “reality” (CPP 410). He aims to choose “the commodious adjective” that “makes it divinity”—a word that could touch the impossible center of a Yeatsian gyre or still point in an Eliotic turning world, the “still speech / As it touches the point of reverberation” (CPP 405). Although “He seeks // God in the object itself, without much choice” (CPP 405), he will not find “this present,” that “venerable mask” (CPP 406).

To read “An Ordinary Evening” with my Yeats-jaundiced eye is to notice that masks suffuse the sequence. So do references to religion, very much including occult-tinged spiritual states, from the “vulgate” of the second line of the poem and the “meditation” of the fourth (CPP 397). A far from exhaustive list would include: “Naked Alpha” and “hierophant Omega” (CPP 400); “the spirit’s alchemicana” (CPP 402); the “haunted” moon and sun that may “Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces” (CPP 402–03); the “metaphysical streets” where “We remember the lion of Juda” (CPP 403); a Jesus-like carpenter whose town (or who himself) is “the model for astral apprentices” (CPP 408); “nameless, flitting characters” and “the hypnosis of that sphere” (CPP 409); necessity, with its resonance of the Greek *Diké*, and “Cythère” (CPP 410); and “breathless things broodingly abreath” (CPP 410). The poem in which, as Stevens told Bernard Heringman, he was trying “to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get” is surprisingly full of the extraordinary, the *unheimlich*, and the beautiful. “[A] shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade” with which the sequence closes (CPP 417), with its prominent indefinite article, is not the same as ordinary shade, the kind that collects under a tree in a town after dark, beneath its ordinary “bough in the electric light” (CPP 407).

This shade may be closer to a ghost: a trace or residue of a human being, which after a kind of crossing over (*travertere*) and having become “A dust” remains among the living for some purpose that extends beyond its bodily life. The other noun in this final sentence is “force,” which leads me to my last point. In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens writes 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.

(CPP 330–31)

The suggestion here is that poetry, or a “supreme fiction,” might attain ends commonly associated with philosophy or Christianity, as indicated in phrases like “first idea” or “immaculate.” “We”—whoever that word may indicate in the poem (ephebe and older man, with perhaps a suggestion of *erastes* and *eromenos*?)—are borne aloft by “an unconscious will.” The poem suggests a *telos* that involves an unusual proposition paralleling the phrase “a force that traverses a shade”: the separation of agency from will. The shades, or a shade, of something hidden (*kalyptos*) in plain sight in “An Ordinary Evening” share with Yeats’s Crazy Jane (or Crazy Jane’s Yeats) a loosening at which Stevens’s poem itself hints but does not make plain: a relaxation of consciousness without an accompanying loss of ability to act. The idea of a subject, a self, usually requires a sense of agency to accompany it. But what happens if these two concepts are decoupled? As the anthropologist Mary Keller argues, this separation is one way to understand spirit or demonic possession. The act of possession, rather like madness, effectively severs subject from (possessed) body, leaving agency and willed action without an “I” in charge.<sup>9</sup> In many cultures, this situation occurs more often than not with women rather than men.

In his last two decades, Yeats was fascinated by the notion of the larger-than-human will. The sequence *Words for Music Perhaps* is one of the clearest illustrations of his working sense of what might be possible in poetry if the massive structures that support the subject, “Monuments of unageing intellect” (VP 407), were not as vital as he had spent most of his life assuming. For Yeats, various areas of research connected with *A Vision* and Eastern philosophy, poetic voice, and an urgent need to understand the implications of the aging body came together in the temporary intensity (or insanity) of the Crazy Jane poems. Jane’s passion, which lasts beyond death, maybe even beyond all dissolution of the body into the bone—or even past that into “a dust” or “a road / That men pass over” (VP 512)—speaks of Yeats’s awareness that an ordinary evening, or morning, depends upon the particular kind of normalcy one has created and in which one believes. The great poet experimented with solving the problem of representing the extrapersonal and supernormal by means of song. At the end of “Crazy Jane on God,” Jane’s satisfied voice changes (one is tempted to add, utterly) into the utterance of an unlocatable and nearly imageless refrain, whose relationship to the stanza introducing it is as nonrational as a “*fol de rol*”:

I had wild Jack for a lover;  
 Though like a road  
 That men pass over  
 My body makes no moan  
 But sings on;  
*All things remain in God.*  
 (VP 512)

Yeatsian echoes in Stevens's poem point to shared concerns. What would happen if agency, the ability to will something into existence, could be separated from subjectivity, as in a "will of wills" (CPP 410)? Is it possible to have a person without the personal? Could such a phenomenon intervene in the standoff between the imagination and reality? In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the "philosopher practicing scales on his piano" (neither playing nor singing) is the first of two images. The second is the unspecified "woman" who evades full representation, or at least representation of what she has written (CPP 417). She tears up her note, despite the desire of whatever voyeuristic reader of Stevens's poem to read it.

The place I think we should look for answers to the questions above, or perhaps just further questions, is at a crossroads of three lines of intersection between these two poems and poets: the occult, gender, and the comic—or, perhaps, the "almost" comic (CPP 407). The occult, insofar as it can function as an Other to revealed religion, can complicate and intensify forces unleashed by the unstable concepts that underpin gender. Comedy, with its distancing effects, may provide space for exploration without doctrine. At any rate, as we know, crossroads are often places of power. The power they emanate may be likened to the lines of poems and the vicarious and uncontrollable pleasure upon which reading them depends.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>B. J. Leggett notes that such an impulse dominates Stevens's late poetry: "This emphasis on the real and the paradox it entails—the premise that the apprehension of the real requires a supreme act of the imagination, a supreme *fiction*—persists" (69).

<sup>2</sup>The transcription of the text of the letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham on January 4, 1939, is slightly incorrect as it appears in the 1955 *Letters*; see also *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, InteLex Electronic Edition, accession number 7363 (hereafter cited as *CL InteLex* with accession number).

<sup>3</sup>While mysticism fascinated Yeats, he wanted to experience altered or selfless states of consciousness far more often than he actually achieved them. In a late, somewhat tongue-in-cheek letter to his friend Ethel Mannin, he wrote, "Am I a mystic?—no, I am a practical man. I have seen the raising of Lazarus and the loaves and fishes and have made the usual measurements, plummet line, spirit-level and have taken the temperature by pure mathematic" (*Letters* 921).

<sup>4</sup>All poetry citations marked by *VP* refer to *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*.

<sup>5</sup>Among critics who discuss Stevens's aphoristic inclinations are Litz, Coyle, and Perloff.

<sup>6</sup>Altieri's contention that abstraction, or rather "abstraction blooded" (CPP 333), serves Stevens as a "site where it becomes possible to rethink poetry's relation to both heroism and to history" is relevant here (321), as is his reading of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" XXVII with an emphasis on how the word *as* "literally produces resem-



blances, affords shifts in the level of discourse, and allows us to entertain provisional sympathies with a variety of attitudes" (346).

<sup>7</sup>Ragg 104, quoting from Stevens's copy of Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* 46 (8 in orig.; ellipsis by Ragg); originally published as *La Vie des formes* (1934).

<sup>8</sup>See the facsimiles of drafts with accompanying transcriptions in Yeats, *Words for Music Perhaps* 340–49.

<sup>9</sup>Keller's work on female spirit possession is relevant not only to Crazy Jane but also to the work of George Yeats and the system of *A Vision*; see Keller's *The Hammer and the Flute*.

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