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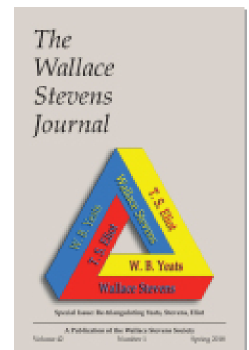

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"Where / Do I begin and end?": Circular Imagery in the Revolutionary Poetics of Stevens and Yeats

HANNAH SIMPSON

THE "FASCINATION WITH GEOMETRIC FORMS," Miranda B. Hickman observes, "provided many modern writers with a language through which to imagine and articulate their ideals" (xiii).[1] This article investigates the circular imagery in Wallace Stevens's and W. B. Yeats's poetry, arguing that both men's use of the circle as a recurring image can be read as reflective of their opposing political ideologies. Examining Yeats's "The Second Coming," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and *A Vision*, and Stevens's "Connoisseur of Chaos," "The Sail of Ulysses," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" reveals Stevens's modification of Yeats's universally subsuming circle into his own pluralistic and localized device.

Both Yeats and Stevens turn to the circle as an ordering structure when faced with the political crises of modernity, including the chaos provoked by Anglo-Irish conflict and two world wars. Joseph Frank explains this shared move by arguing that when "the external world is an incomprehensible chaos" and its artists feel unable to "take pleasure in depicting this world in their art," they might instead turn to "linear-geometric forms" that "have the stability, the harmony" for which they yearn (54). Whether we read Yeats's and Stevens's turn to the circle as part of the psychological response that Frank propounds, or as Stevens's conscious reworking of Yeats's established high modernist move, an exploration of Yeats's and Stevens's use of the circle image reveals a fascinating counterpointed relationship between their respective political beliefs. Caroline Levine instructively laments that literary critics have "typically treated aesthetic and political arrangements as separate," despite the fact that in "Sorting out what goes where, the work of political power often involves enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries. . . . In other words, politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping" (3). Similarly, Yeats's fondness for and Stevens's resistance to the universalizing circular structure mirrors their differing early political ideals.

Yeats offers a universalizing circle that encompasses and structures all of history's chaos and change, replicating his early faith in a single order that governs all beings. His well-documented flirtation with Irish and

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European fascism in his youth demonstrates his interest in the totalizing, monocratic power structure, similar to that embodied by his all-inclusive circular forms.[2] The individual will is given up to the collective in the fascist state; the individual is absorbed into the universal circle structure in Yeats's poetry. Stevens, like Yeats, invokes the circle as an ordering structure that acts in opposition to the confusion that he saw in the political conflicts around him, and more broadly in the ceaseless flux of the external world. Crucially, however, while Stevens follows Yeats in seeking in geometric form a redemptive or restorative order, the circles in his poetry behave very differently, being part of "the renovation of the image" that Bonnie Costello cites as the "most significant project of modernist poetry" (169). Although Stevens's circles do attempt to order the fragmented chaos of modern life, they are multiple, imaginative constructions with a more personal reach, rather than the single, universalizing structure that Yeats envisions. Stevens resists the absorption of the individual into the mass structure, and this is reflected in his mistrust of any all-encompassing politics, whether right- or left-wing—what Bart Eeckhout identifies in Stevens's early poetry as a "radical individualism at a time of overbearing collective and monolithic ideologies" (123). Stevens's circular structures consistently embody his rejection of any totalizing political view, vaunting instead the imaginative, personal ordering of existence. Scholars have recurrently read Stevens as politically apathetic or unengaged; while this view has been productively challenged elsewhere, reading Stevens's suspicion of political identification through his circle imagery offers another means of countering these apolitical readings, answering Alan Filreis's incredulous question as to "why a poet as shrewd as Stevens could . . . have had such a poor sense of how his poetry situated itself politically" (*Modernism* 6).[3] Stevens's circle imagery is in part his way of articulating his conscious resistance to any totalizing political allegiance, rather than a symptom of his retreat into an ivory tower of apolitical poetry.

Eugene Paul Nassar and David LaGuardia have both touched on the importance of the circle in Stevens's poetic work, but neither accords the image extensive treatment. LaGuardia somewhat obliquely and perhaps even unconsciously links the rejection of historical and poetic tradition with the circle: "Stevens wishes to purge the old structures—destroy them by imaginative acts—so that history cannot inhibit the mind's perception of 'the gorgeous wheel' of reality that follows the paths of the imagination's flux" (5). Nassar more explicitly observes that "The usual figure to sum up Stevens' attitude towards all these various 'curvings' of reality is the circle," but nevertheless reads this circle as a wholly negative image for Stevens, claiming that "this obvious culminating of all curves and arcs is something to be avoided. . . . To live too long within an imaginative mundo is to be locked in a closed circle" (36). Nassar misses the relationship between Stevens's circles and the high modernist circle, and how Stevens keeps his own circles constantly turning within his poetry to

render them a symbol of the individual's poetic power. Moreover, neither Nassar nor LaGuardia makes a connection between Stevens's aesthetics of the circle and his political ideology.

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Possibly Yeats's most famous use of circle imagery appears in "The Second Coming," in the oft-quoted line "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (*CPY* 187).[4] The gyres in Yeats's cosmology and poetry, as described in *A Vision*, are formed of two spirals structured from the apex of their respective cones round their sides, increasing to fullest expansion at the base of the cones. These gyres revolve constantly and when

> a narrowing and a widening gyre reach their limit, the one the utmost contraction the other the utmost expansion, they change places, point to circle, circle to point . . . and continue as before, one always narrowing, one always expanding, and yet bound for ever to one another. (*Critical Edition* 131–32)

The circular motion of the gyres represents the trajectories taken by individual beings as they move through phases of life, and also the historical trajectory of civilizations as they develop and decline. The gyres thus contain "every possible movement of thought and of life," Yeats claims (*A Vision* 78). In a 1921 note to "The Second Coming," Yeats observed that "All our scientific, democratic, fast-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre" (*CPY* 650); as "heterogeneous" as that civilization might be, it "all" belongs, is "all" encompassed, within the movement of the gyre.

In *A Vision*, Yeats also describes the individual's journey through life's changes and reincarnations by way of two other circular structures: the "Great Wheel" and the phases of the moon. Every individual can be located on these structures, and their disposition extrapolated from that position. This circle structure is, as Graham Hough puts it, "a vast design, so intricate that all experience could find its place within it, and yet be part of the same pattern" (85). Both the individual's and history's cyclical progress are contained within Yeats's circle images; these circles are so expansive as to contain every conceivable element of existence.

There is room even for chaos in this circular order, as evoked in both "The Second Coming" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Such chaos becomes part of a greater order: the predictable and inevitable chaos that marks the switch from one gyre to another, which will end as inevitably as it began. The "whirl" of the "Platonic Year" in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (*CPY* 208) is, as Michael Wood notes, "an order that can

subsume all disorders, contain any amount of violence and turbulence" (60). The circular figure and movement accords an all-encompassing shape and order to what otherwise threatens to be an overwhelming chaos "that pitches common things about" (*CPY* 207). The "whirl" that might otherwise act as another ruinous, disordering force is rendered an agent of order by its circular direction. The formal circular qualities of "The Second Coming" replicate the ordering and unifying potential of the circular form: the repetition of certain words—"turning," "loosed," "surely," "at hand," "Second Coming," "out"—mimic the circling return that the "second coming" itself enacts, and provides a similarly unifying, ordering structure for the poem (*CPY* 207–08). Yeats's circles allow him to perceive a reassuring order in the modern pandemonium around him.

There is, however, a darker side to this system of ordering individuals and history: the determinism and the de-individualization of the beings caught within it. Every individual and every civilization move inexorably about these circular structures. The gyre, the Great Wheel, and the moon offer various circular forms that not only contain all humanity but also control their movement in an inescapable order. As is evoked in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," individuals are "whirled" within this system, "their tread" regulated by the rhythm of the presumably circular gong (*CPY* 208); however "wearied running round and round in their courses" they may be (*CPY* 210), their free will is given up to the monocratic collective form.

Intensifying this sense of determinism, Yeats presents his circular structures as preexisting and discoverable by the insightful poet, rather than being imaginative or poetically created structures. These circular forms are discovered or intuited rather than constructed by the individual. Significantly, Yeats credits the revelation of the circular structures of *A Vision* to the spirits that spoke to him through his wife Georgie's automatic writing, rather than claiming to have constructed them himself. Likewise, in "The Second Coming," the revelation of the circular form of history is greeted with the speaker's acknowledgement "now I know," combining with the sudden quality of the "revelation" of the poem to demonstrate how the circular structure is revealed *to* rather than created *by* the individual, something that preexists, and will continue to exist after, the individual who perceives it (*CPY* 187). Correspondingly, in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," Yeats mocks those who think they can impose their own ordering structure on the world, those who "planned to bring the world under a rule / Who are but weasels fighting in a hole" (*CPY* 207). Those who seek to foist their own order on the chaos around them are in fact caught within the universalizing circular structure, the "hole" that entraps them. The individual, even the gifted poet, can only "read the signs" rather than impose structures (*CPY* 207); the ordering circular structure preexists and subsumes the individual.

Yeats's all-encompassing, strictly ordering circle imagery links to his fascist-inflected politics. Although Elizabeth Cullingford has tried to distance Yeats from fascism, most scholars from Louis MacNeice in 1941 onwards agree that, as Conor Cruise O'Brien puts it, Yeats "was as near to being a Fascist as the conditions of his country permitted" (41). Reed Way Dasenbrock, for example, observes that Yeats "consistently had complimentary things to say about Fascist regimes from 1922 until his death" and "was intimately involved in the abortive Irish fascist movement, the Blueshirts" (1262), including composing a series of marching songs for them in the early 1930s. Yeats himself described his developing system in April 1933 as "Fascism modified by religion" (*LWBY* 808).[5] Fascist Italy offered him a model: after the Blackshirts' successful march on Rome in October 1922, he wrote to H. J. C. Grierson that "the Ireland that reacts from the present disorder is turning its eyes towards" Mussolini's Italy (*LWBY* 693). His attraction to Italian and Irish fascism was stimulated in part by what he called his "deep gloom" concerning this "present disorder" in Ireland (*LWBY* 675, 693). This disorder called for, he thought, a "return to conservative politics" (*LWBY* 693) that would satiate his "rancor against all who, except under the most dire necessity, disturb public order" (*CPY* 706). Here we can see how Yeats's sense of politics was closely bound to the ideas of order and disorder that would stimulate his use of circle imagery in his poetry. Just as the circle in Yeats's poetry and cosmology subsumes and orders all existence into one united, precisely regulated being, so too the fascist political order that Yeats envisions would unite Ireland in a single, orderly entity.

Yeats makes an implicit link between the circle structure and his fascist leanings in his comments on meeting General Eoin O'Duffy, leader of the Irish Blueshirts: "I was ready, for I had just re-written for the seventh time the part of *A Vision* that deals with the future" (*LWBY* 812). Given that *A Vision* is the text in which Yeats most explicitly lays out his use of gyre, wheel, and moon imagery, his association of the text with his political activities—and, specifically, with his engagement with the Irish fascist movement—offers a connection between his circular structures and his desire for an ordered, unified state. Similarly, "The Great Wheel" section of the 1937 version of *A Vision* is littered with footnotes citing the work of Giovanni Gentile, the philosopher "spokesman" of the Italian fascist regime who would "give public expression to what was to become the doctrine of Fascism" as the ghostwriter of Mussolini's *A Doctrine of Fascism* (Gregor 69, 56), and of Benedetto Croce, an early (though later disillusioned) supporter of Mussolini's fascist government. While Yeats too eventually became dissatisfied with fascist violence, even withdrawing his permission for the Irish Blueshirts to use his marching songs, nevertheless his all-encompassing, monocratically ordering circular structures in his poetic and cosmological writings reflect his continued faith in a similarly all-encompassing, monocratically ordering political structure.

Stevens likewise invokes the circle as an ordering structure in the face of the "orderless flux of reality," as LaGuardia characterizes Stevens's vision of the world around him (3). The 1948 essay "The Shaper" implies that the necessary shape the poet makes out of chaos is circular. Stevens calls Paul Rosenfeld, the literary, art, and music critic, "a shaper" or "*Schöpfer*, who lived for the sake of *Schöpfung*"; the word *Schöpfung* itself is drawn from the German verb *schöpfen*, which means both "to create" and "to scoop." The German term, presumably deliberately employed by the Anglophone Stevens, brings together the concept of artistic creation and circularity. The artist's task is to turn experience into a circular form, the essay reiterates; the "world composed of music," for example, will "whirl round in music alone" (*CPP* 818)—the word "whirl" deriving from the Old Norse *hvirfla*, meaning "to turn around," or *hiverfill*, meaning "circle." Stevens follows Yeats, then, in offering a circular form as the appropriate ordering structure for the modern individual. However, Stevens's ordering circles differ from Yeats's circles in two key ways. First, they have an individual rather than universal compass; second, they are imaginatively created rather than revealed as a preexisting structure. In Stevens's poetry, the individual's reality is productively "curved" by the poetic imagination, rather than the all-encompassing circular forms of universal reality being revealed to the privileged poet. As Yeats's circular structures embody his political leanings, so too do Stevens's circles reflect his own ambivalent attitude toward political identification.

Scholars have long debated the degree of political engagement that can be traced in Stevens's poetry, with Costello perhaps best summarizing the current cautious consensus: "Stevens's 'ideas of order,' while they are not social and political ideas, nevertheless arise within a world stirred up by the changes in these spheres of experience" (177). One of the most clearly recorded instances of the allegedly politically unengaged Stevens's early involvement with the American political sphere is his covering of the McKinley-Bryan presidential race in 1900, as a freshly graduated reporter for *The New York Tribune*.[6] Stevens's position as a political reporter ensured that he was acutely engaged with the presidential race and the two distinct visions of the country's future that each candidate offered. William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic and Populist candidate, envisioned "an isolated, agrarian United States" (Longenbach 28–29) that would be anti-corporate, anti-military, and anti-imperialist. Government, to Bryan's mind, touched only "a part" of the "small arc of that circle which we spend on earth," rather than "the infinite circle of existence," and should not presume to do further (Bryan 262). William McKinley, the incumbent Republican candidate and ultimate victor, championed "an imperialist, industrial nation" with a resoundingly international presence (Longenbach 29), continuing what Philip S. Golub has termed the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century American government's "imperial cosmology, that is, a belief system about the ordering of the world" that privileged American

authority and led to “nearly continuous [American] territorial and economic expansion” (9). We might summarize, then, by saying that Bryan focused on the local and the domestic, American individualism and self-sustaining self-reliance, whereas McKinley offered a nation with a broader scope of ambition, a “pervasive culture of expansion and force” (Golub 9), encouraging the large institutions of business, industry, and the military, and determinedly expanding America’s international sphere of influence on the global stage.[7] That Stevens took the trouble to return home to Reading, Pennsylvania, to vote for Bryan in November 1900 demonstrates his early inclination toward the localized and the individualized. Throughout his life, Stevens would continue to favor these narrower, more individualized spheres in matters political and beyond, and it is precisely this ideology that I suggest can be traced in the differences between his circular imagery and the grand Yeatsian circle.

Indeed, even a vote for Bryan in 1900 was in many ways a vote for something still less concretely defined than the traditional political party, as James Longenbach has suggested. Although ostensibly a collective movement of the common people struggling against a privileged elite, Bryan’s “neo-populism” is characterized by Longenbach as an “uneasy Populist alliance of ideologies culled from the political right and left” (32). This sense of uneasy alliance, oscillating between two political stances while warily refusing to commit wholeheartedly to identification with either one, would come to characterize Stevens’s own later politics. By 1934, for example, when he was asked by *New Verse*, “Do you take your stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?” he responded, “I am afraid that I don’t” (*CPP* 771). He refused identification with the political right and the “so-called social revolutionists” with whom Hi Simons tried to align him, but also told Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935, “I hope I am headed left, but there are lefts and lefts, and certainly I am not headed for the ghastly left of MASSES” (qtd. in Longenbach 145, 137), punningly aligning the American Marxist publication *New Masses* with the common masses. Stevens, then, refused the absorption of the individual into the mass of either left- or right-wing politics.

Stevens’s concern with the relation of the individual to the mass extended to his querying the relation between the poet and the general public. He evidences recurrent anxiety concerning the possibility of being subsumed into the general populace, mirroring Yeats’s own disillusionment with his early attempts to engage the public masses via the Abbey Theatre. Longenbach records that Stevens copied out several excerpts dealing with this question early in his career, including Sully-Prudhomme’s suggestion that the ideal artist “draws into himself, encloses himself in his pride and individualism. He disdains the crowd. . . . He places himself above it” (qtd. on 34). The influence of these early reflections is evident in Stevens’s own later writings on the relationship between poet and public. He resented the pressure for poetry to express a set political dogma or order: “I might

be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none," he declared in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (*CPP* 659). His concern with the individual's absorption into the universal mass in modern existence—"There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen and, unhappily, they are intimate with us" (*CPP* 653)—was allied with his suspicion of the poet's risk of becoming subsumed by the political masses:

> The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general. . . . [The poet] must remain individual. As individual he must remain free. The politician expects everyone to be absorbed as he himself is absorbed. (*CPP* 814)

Poetry thus became for Stevens a field of tension between the poetic self and the wider public, the abstractly artistic and the explicitly political. In either dogmatically ordered politics or politically dogmatic poetry, the self risks being lost, absorbed within a fixedly prescribed poetic and political order, the individual submerged within the de-individualized, shaped, and aestheticized mass.

In Stevens's employment of the circle in his poetry, then, we see his attempts to establish an alternative comprehensible order that is, crucially, distinct from the overdetermined structure that would rob the individual of free will and of productive, imaginative engagement with the surrounding world. "Connoisseur of Chaos," published in 1942, expresses the sense that modern existence has lost this unified whole: "these opposite things partake of one, / At least that was the theory, when bishops' books / Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that" (*CPP* 195). The attempt to enforce too prescriptive an order on the chaotic modern world produces more inhibiting confusion instead of any kind of resolution, since "A violent order is disorder," the poem tells us (*CPP* 194). Rather than attempting to encompass the universe in a stable, predetermined structure, as Yeats's gyres do, Stevens's reader is urged to accept that "chaos" is the new "order" of modern existence, that "A great disorder is an order" (*CPP* 194).

Stevens's expression of these two recognitions—"A violent order is disorder" and "A great disorder is an order"—paradoxically forms a unified whole, a form of "essential unity": "These / Two things are one" (*CPP* 195, 194). Importantly, however, this unity is not a "fixed," stable one:

> Now, A
> And B are not like statuary, posed
> For a vista in the Louvre. They are things chalked
> On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see.
> (*CPP* 195)

The unified whole is not fixed "like statuary," but rather part of the ceaselessly changing "immense disorder of truths." The circular tendency here is not explicit, but subtly suggested; the poem describes unity in terms that are circular by implication. Stevens specifies that the unified whole is not statically linear, "a vista in the Louvre" (*CPP* 195). A vista is typically seen through a long, narrow opening, and the Jardin des Tuileries onto which the Louvre looks is laid out in the orderly *jardin à la française* style created by André le Nôtre, typified by its long, narrow, symmetrical avenues enclosed by meticulously ordered lines of trees. The interior of the Sully, Richelieu, and Denon wings of the Musée du Louvre in their modern form replicate this same long, straight, narrow architecture, presenting a linear vista view to its inhabitants. This is also the fixed, linear shape that Stevens decries in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words": "The subject-matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space'" (*CPP* 658). By contrast, the "chalked" A and B whole is impermanent, ready to be erased and redrawn at any moment as the individual sees fit, and the phonetic value of the long "a" /ɔ:/ phoneme in "chalked" sets up the circle motif that Stevens will use throughout his poetry to embody this vaunting of a new impermanent ordering structure. The labializing nature of this open-mid back rounded vowel rounds the lips into a circular shape, a protruded rounding that makes the speaker's mouth into the circular shape itself. The shape of the relation between modern existence's elements is a circular one, and the circular shape is associated with the inconstancy and disordered order of Stevens's radically altered, individually unified whole.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar," published in 1936, and "The Sail of Ulysses," written in 1954 and published posthumously, demonstrate more explicitly Stevens's interrogation of the circular structure and its relation to politically inflected ideas of ordering the individual and the masses. "The Man with the Blue Guitar" aligns the political ordering of the individual with the aesthetic shaping undertaken by the artist. Longenbach identifies in this Stevens's "keen awareness of the dangers of aestheticizing experience" (vii), which the song of the blue guitar at first threatens to do: "A million people on one string? / And all their manner in the thing" (*CPP* 136). Gathering the mass of individuals together in one artistic unit—here the linear guitar string that, even combined with other linear strings, can produce only "the chord that falsifies" (*CPP* 140)—distorts and disorders rather than ordering and unifying, provoking the "buzzing" and "chattering" of the mass rather than a unified melody (*CPP* 136, 137). The speaker's cry evoking the never-beginning-never-ending circular form—"Where / Do I begin and end?"—thus expresses not the joy of union within artistic form, but rather the unpleasant experience of being melded with the mass of others, the fear and confusion when faced with "That which momentously declares // Itself not to be I and yet / Must be" (*CPP* 140). Here is what Jacqueline Vaught Brogan calls "the frightening

potential of the impulse toward unity: annihilation of individuality in the 'one-ness'" encouraged by forcefully unifying political and poetic order (*Stevens and Simile* 16). The ordering and shaping in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" threatens to become the all-encompassing Yeatsian circle, or even the distorting linear guitar string, melding the individual into the mass.

Yet there is still a need for some kind of ordering structure in the wake of this rejection of the grand, totalizing form, as Stevens again confronts the high modernist concern with how to negotiate modern chaos. As in Yeats's "The Second Coming," "The Man with the Blue Guitar" presents the ravaged, fragmented landscape of modern existence. Invoking a fellow artist of the modern destruction of order and belief—and figuring an ironic incursion of cubism into the tension between the linear and the circular—Stevens demands,

> Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard
> Of destructions," a picture of ourselves,
>
> Now, an image of our society?
> Do I sit, deformed . . . ?
> (*CPP* 141)

Stevens's individual refuses to be contained within the grand, generalizing structures, rejecting such "Universal delusions of universal grandeurs" (*CPP* 696). Detached from the great unifying constructions of the past, the individuals once encompassed there now find themselves unsure whether they too have been "deformed" along with their beliefs and their societies: "Things as they are have been destroyed. / Have I?" (*CPP* 142). Following the modernist demolition of the past's structures, there remains the necessity of some kind of form or order to navigate existence, and to position oneself as an individual in relation to the rest of the world.

"The Sail of Ulysses" likewise testifies to the impulse to shape the incomprehensible elements of existence, citing the "joy of meaning in design / Wrenched out of chaos" (*CPP* 463). Shaping is necessary so that a "litter of truths" can become a "whole" (*CPP* 464) rather than a "thing fumbling for its form" (*CPP* 466). At least some ordering structure is necessary—"Need makes / The right to use," the poet's speaker reminds us (*CPP* 467), evoking both the need for some form for comprehension and Stevens's own appropriation of the poetic circle motif—and the shape of that order is, like the unified whole in "Connoisseur of Chaos," circular. This "creator" of order is "of an unknown sphere" (*CPP* 463), and

> His mind presents the world
> And in his mind the world revolves.
> The revolutions through day and night,

Through wild spaces of other suns and moons,
. . . .
Are matched by other revolutions
In which the world goes round and round
. . . .
the world
Goes round in the climates of the mind . . .
(*CPP* 465)

The interconnected series of revolutions here, augmented by the circular repetition of the language, recalls Yeats's complex system of wheels within wheels within wheels in *A Vision*. Indeed, much like *A Vision* for many readers, it may not seem to render the whole very much more comprehensible.

Crucially, however, the circular forms of "The Sail of Ulysses," while seemingly of an incomprehensibly universal reach, are in fact limited in scope to the individual. The apparently universal revolutions of "suns and moons" and rotation of day and night are restricted to the individual's perception, revolved by and in the individual's mind: "His mind presents the world / And in his mind the world revolves," section VI tells us (*CPP* 465), rendering explicit the essentially solipsistic nature of the relation between revolving mind and revolving world. The "unknown sphere" is the "center of the self," the note to stanza IV informs the reader (*CPP* 463), and the earlier references to how Ulysses "read his own mind" (*CPP* 462) and the "human loneliness" and "solitude" in which knowledge is attained (*CPP* 463) reinforce this sense of the fundamentally individual reach of the ordering circle. "[F]ew people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings," Stevens declares in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (*CPP* 684), and we can thus understand the "other revolutions / In which the world goes round and round" with which this revolution is "matched" as the subjective vision of other individual minds that order the world in their own manner (*CPP* 465). To be "Master of the world and of himself" is tautological, since the only world that one can access and master is the world as one perceives it (*CPP* 465). In a slippage that is common in Stevens's poetry, and that he articulates in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (1942) as "that difference between the and an" (*CPP* 230), the "the" of "the true creator" and "the world" of which he is master (*CPP* 463, 465) is belied by an implied "a" or "an," the universalizing Yeatsian circle replaced by the local, non-hierarchical, equally weighted individual circle of Stevens.

Likewise, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens individualizes the grand cosmological circle. Here, the star as the new cosmological ordering and creative imagery in place of the sun is made explicitly circular, being "both star and orb." Unlike the monocratic sun, however, there are a "thousand" of these orbs (*CPP* 141). Stevens breaks up Yeats's universal-

izing circular form; now there are multiple individual circles, each with an individual scope. He declares, "Nothing must stand // Between you and the shapes you take / When the crust of shape has been destroyed" (*CPP* 150). When the restricting "crust" of the old universalizing, dictating Yeatsian circle—"the old shape / Worn and leaning to nothingness," as "The Sail of Ulysses" has it (*CPP* 466)—has been broken down, then the individual is free to take on his or her own "shape." "Shape," some kind of form, is still necessary to comprehend and navigate modern existence, but it is the personal circle that permits this to the individual: "You as you are? You are yourself" (*CPP* 150). "I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can," the speaker admits at the poem's opening (*CPP* 135): we can no longer structure the entire world and all civilization in an all-encompassing circular form, as Yeats tried to do, but we can achieve a productive vision in the circle of individual scope.

That this emphasis on the strictly individual scope of such ordering has a political valence is underlined by Eeckhout's observation that "Stevens was at pains to get across, even on a philosophical level, that his 'rage for order' was anything but totalitarian" (228). Longenbach draws a parallel here with Yeats's practice in the aftermath of World War I:

> Yeats said explicitly in the first version of *A Vision* (1925) that he was charting the heavens to replace a worldview that "German bombs" had destroyed: "why should we complain, things move by mathematical necessity, all changes can be dated by gyre and cone." In his own way, Stevens was doing the same thing. . . . Yet Stevens was careful not to do exactly what Yeats did in his postwar work—create a new totalizing mythology in place of an older one. (80)

Yeats would also, in the same decade during which he published "The Second Coming," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and the first version of *A Vision*, come to envision a smaller, more selective circle in matters aesthetic. In 1922, disillusioned by public reaction to the Abbey Theatre and its financial difficulties, he admitted that "the dream of my early manhood, that a modern nation can return to Unity of Culture, is false; though it may be we can achieve it for some *small circle* of men and women, and there leave it till the moon bring round its century" (*Autobiographies* 229; emphasis added). However, where Yeats envisions a select elite group of artistic culture (which is still a notably larger circle than Stevens's individual "orbs"), he retains the all-encompassing cosmological circle. The very "small circle of men and women" is still subsumed by the grand circular "moon" that will "bring round" the century along the gyres' universalizing circular motion. Stevens recognizes the need for a comforting form to give order to modernist chaos, but both "The Sail of Ulysses" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar" refuse to subsume the group of individu-

als forcefully into its ordering forms. Stevens's circles, in both their poetic and political contexts, order existence into a comprehensible form, but at a local level: the individual's concept of existence is ordered, in his or her own subjective circle, rather than all civilization's existence.

The final qualification that Stevens places on his circular structures in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is their temporary, ever-changing nature. "[T]he balance does not quite rest," the speaker declares (*CPP* 148); while the poet may hold his "world upon his nose," he must keep "twirl[ing] the thing" in order to keep it in constant motion (*CPP* 146). Stevens characterizes his circles as endlessly rotating, following his sense of the ceaselessly renewed interaction between the individual's imagination and his or her surrounding reality, since that reality itself is in constant flux: "The only possible order of life is one in which all order is incessantly changing" (*L* 291–92). Other critics have noted that Stevens seeks to "endorse . . . a sense of reality constantly changing" (Filreis, *Modernism* 262) and thus to "extol the virtue of not maintaining fixed thoughts about the nature of poetry or politics" (Longenbach 34). The ceaselessly turning circle offers a poetic image to convey this.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," published in 1942, likewise enacts this resistance to the static form. Whereas the moving circle is vaunted—especially in "the going round / / And round and round, . . . / Until merely going round is a final good" (*CPP* 350)—the static circle is a different matter. Lucy Beckett rightly characterizes the poem's close as "amused and a little sad, at the possible end" of the ceaselessly turning circle (161): "They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne. . . . / You will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (*CPP* 351). Significantly, Stevens links this end of constant circular movement to the political in cantos II and III of "It Must Change." "The President ordains" immortality, and orders his surroundings "to a metaphysical t" (*CPP* 337), but this results only in the "immobile" and ultimately "absurd" statue of the General (*CPP* 338). Recalling the "statuary, posed" of "Connoisseur of Chaos," the geometrically "fixed" here becomes linked to the politically "fixed," the narrow-minded autocracy that seeks to stabilize the world as it desires. The image provides a poetic version of Stevens's statement in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" that only "if a social movement moved one deeply enough, [then] its moving poems would follow. No politician can command the imagination" (*CPP* 660). The politician's "command" is set in opposition to "movement" in several implied forms: physical motion, committed political engagement, to be emotionally moved, to be moved to poetic expression. In contrast to this "movement," or to the ceaseless movement of the turning circle structure, in canto III "The music halted and the horse stood still" (*CPP* 338). The political "orator" or "spokesman" exists at the "barriers" to movement rather than its circular continuation (*CPP* 343); he imposes static order rather than moving creativity, and thus freezes the ceaseless turning of the circle that acts, as Costello notes, as

"a defence against complacency and rhetorical platitude that would turn poetry into a vehicle for dogma" (178).

Thus, Alan Perlis summarizes, "Stevens rejects all notions of a fixed, stable reality. The external world is in a state of constant flux. Since we are part of this world, we can only affirm our orientation to it by flowing with its cyclical motions" (95). The cyclical structure that the individual discovers or creates for him- or herself can alone do that. Again, Stevens's poetic and political systems align here, given the poem's meta-reflection and its political imagery. Stevens declared, "I don't have ideas that are permanently fixed. My conception of what I think a poet should be and do changes, and I hope, constantly grows" (*L* 289). Likewise, proudly proclaimed political identification tends to be too fixed, too static, to allow for this constant flexibility needed to engage properly with the world. It is only the individual subjective vision, rather than that conditioned and constructed by group allegiance, that can accommodate this necessarily flexible shaping. Only the ceaselessly working and individual imagination can guarantee a fresh, non-repetitive, productively "curved" imaginative vision of the otherwise incomprehensible modern world—and so only the ever-turning circle of a purely individual scope is acceptable within Stevens's poetry.

In conclusion, then, Yeats and Stevens both turn to the circle image as an ordering device in their poetic work, but conceive and render it differently following their diverging political ideologies. Stevens modifies Yeats's high modernist circle. He does not reject order or structure entirely, recognizing the necessary reassurance against the chaotic changes of the modern world, and he employs the constant motion of the turning circle as the embodiment of this ordering structure throughout much of his poetry. Order, political and otherwise, is not inherently negative in Stevens's work, but certain forms of it are fatal.

Consequently, we find politically inflected distinctions between Stevens's and Yeats's circular forms. Stevens resists the universal imposition of the high modernist circle, the manner in which all individuals are subsumed into the singular mass, with or without their consent, caught in a generalizing structure that preexists and will postdate their own existence. Stevens's readers must be active "Natives of a dwindled sphere" instead (*CPP* 429), constructing their own individual, idiosyncratic, impermanent circles through which to perceive and negotiate a now-comprehensible imaginatively curved and shaped reality—a step, as Eeckhout puts it, "from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from monolithic identity to pluralistic difference, from the unified to the diversified" (181).

Moreover, Stevens rejects the high modernist circle because to reuse the same structure that we "had seen long since" and now "see again" would in itself constitute a cessation of the constant motion embodied by his own circular ideal (*CPP* 337). The Yeatsian circle "has not changed enough" to properly represent a world in flux in Stevens's poetry (*CPP* 337). It is only

the idiosyncratic circular structure of a localized scope that can guarantee productive interaction with the continual flux of the external world. In place of the Yeatsian circle, then, Stevens offers the personal, imaginatively constructed and sustained circle, which embodies the localized and reassuring ordering of the external world and the potential for meaningful interaction between individual beings.

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Notes

[1]I am grateful to Bonnie Costello, James Brophy, and the Oxford University Work in Progress seminar for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

[2]See, for example, Chadwick; Cullingford; Freyer; Hickman; O'Brien.

[3]For the turn toward political readings of Stevens, see Filreis, *Wallace Stevens*; Longenbach; Brogan, *The Violence Within*.

[4]All references to *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* will be systematically abbreviated as *CPY*.

[5]All references to *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* will be systematically abbreviated as *LWBY*.

[6]This article by necessity offers only one exemplary instance of Stevens's political ideology. For a fuller treatment of the poet's political engagement, see Filreis, *Wallace Stevens*, and Longenbach.

[7]Although McKinley would be assassinated shortly after the 1900 presidential election, his successor, Theodore Roosevelt, would continue his expansionist policies, and Woodrow Wilson would likewise instigate a "project for a new American-centred world order" (Golub 59), with the result that during World War II Walter Lippmann would write approvingly that America's international expansion had achieved territorial control stretching "over an immense section of the surface of the globe," including "the defense of territory from Alaska to Luzon, from Greenland to Brazil, from Canada to the Argentine" (18).

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